FUTURA

THE CYBERNAUTS

A New Avengers novel by PETER CAVE

The New Avengers 5:
LAST OF THE CYBERNAUTS

Also in the NEW AVENGERS series:

1 : HOUSE OF CARDS
2 : THE EAGLES NEST
3 : TO CATCH A RAT
4 : FIGHTING MEN

Peter Cave

The New Avengers 5:
Last of The Cybernauts

Based on the original script by
Brian Clemens

Futura Publications Limited
A Futura Book

A Futura Book

First published in Great Britain by
Futura Publications Limited in 1977

Copyright © The Avengers (Film & TV)
Enterprises Limited 1977

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

ISBN : 0 8600 7530 3

Printed in Great Britain by
C. Nicholls & Company Ltd
The Philips Park Press
Manchester

Futura Publications Limited,
110 Warner Road, Camberwell,
London S.E.5.

For Maggie . . . and The Fish.

CHAPTER ONE

The phone shrilled. Steed closed the red file he was studying, dropping it casually at the side of his armchair. He rose easily, crossing the study to his desk. There was an expectant smile on his face as he glanced at his watch, prior to picking up the receiver. It was exactly six pm. It would be Laura, confirming their dinner date. Such a punctual woman!

Steed lifted the receiver to his ear. 'Yes?'

'Steed?' The voice was deep, husky. Masculine. Laura had an appealing throatiness, certainly, but unless she had developed a serious infection of the larynx, somebody else had beaten her to a telephone. The urbane smile faded from Steed's face. 'What is it?'

'Number four, Steed.' The simple message was followed by a brief chuckle, then by silence. The line clicked, and went dead.

'Damn!' Steed slammed the receiver back into its rest heavily, venting his anger and frustration upon the innocent instrument of death. He had no illusions about the meaning of the cryptic message. There had been three such calls in the last month; each had preceded the death of a top agent in the Department. One had been a close friend. All had been important men.

Number four. Steed strode briskly back to the fireside,

scooping up the discarded file and flipping through the index at the front. In seconds, he had the name to match up with the number.

Harry Selnick! Another close friend. Steed checked the address list. Selnick lived in a block of flats just off Maida Vale. Close to Purdey's apartment.

Steed moved quickly. There might still be time. He recrossed the room to the desk, reaching for the telephone. Even as his fingers closed around the receiver, it shivered from the vibration of the ringing tone.

'Steed,' he barked into the mouthpiece.

'John, darling,' a soft voice purred over the earpiece. 'About our little tête a tête this evening.'

Laura's seductive voice failed to bring Steed any pleasure. Death had intervened, spoiling the evening. It was no time for social chit-chat.

'Sorry Laura, I really can't talk now. Our date will have to be cancelled I'm afraid.' Steed spoke as politely as he could, in the urgency of the circumstances. To have been more abrupt would have been churlish. To banter words was to gamble with a man's life. The brief compromise would have to do. Steed dropped the receiver into the rest temporarily, then lifted it again and dialled Purdey's number.

'Purdey! It's John Steed,' he muttered quickly as she answered. 'I want you to get round to Harry Selnick's place as soon as you can. Know the address?'

'Tower Rise, Maida Vale.'

Steed grunted an acknowledgement. 'Apartment 103, twelfth floor.'

'Trouble?'

'No time,' Steed blurted out. 'Move it – quickly.' He

hung up, trusting Purdey not to waste a second in responding to the call of duty. After a brief pause, he picked up the telephone again and rang Gambit.

The two men looked up expectantly as Purdey glided into the room.

'Well?' Steed murmured.

Purdey's exquisite face was bland and emotionless. 'He was out,' she said flatly.

'Out?'

'Out of the window,' Purdey expanded. 'Twelve stories up. Messy.' She caught the brief look of anguish on Steed's face, feeling guilty. 'Oh, I'm sorry, Steed. Harry Selnick was a personal friend of yours, wasn't he?'

Steed smiled wistfully. 'Yes he was,' he murmured softly. He paused, forcing a casual air. 'Don't worry, Purdey ... there is no gentle or pleasant way to explain away death.'

'Several deaths,' Mike Gambit put in, pointedly.

'Mmm,' Steed mused. 'Four, to be exact. All top agents, all apparent accidents in their homes.'

'Apparent being the operative word,' Purdey interjected. 'We know differently, don't we?'

Steed toyed with a pen, scribbling brief notes upon the outer cover of the red file. He muttered aloud as he wrote. 'Emmerson ... electrocuted in his bath. Faulty hot air dryer fitting. Grant ... found at the bottom of his staircase with a broken neck. Peters ... crushed by his own car in his garage ... defective jack suspected.' Steed threw down the pen with a gesture of frustration. 'Dammit ... they all *could* have been accidents.'

'If it hadn't been for the telephone calls,' Purdey put in, finishing his sentence for him.

Steed nodded. 'Exactly. The telephone calls. On my private line. No one outside the Department should have access to that number.'

A thoughtful silence descended on the room. After a couple of minutes, Gambit spoke. 'It all seems to point to one possibility, doesn't it?' he queried. 'We have a traitor – inside the Department.'

Steed nodded. 'A double agent,' he said heavily. 'Devious ... and deadly. The worst kind of trouble to have.'

'I suppose we all realise that any one of us could be next on the list?' Purdey stated calmly.

'The thought had crossed my mind,' Steed admitted. 'But I rejected it, of course.'

Both Gambit and Purdey regarded him with puzzled faces. Steed forced a cheerful grin. 'Too defeatist by half,' he explained, trying to lighten the mood.

Gambit shook his head, grinning wryly. 'You slay me Steed, you really do. We have a loose assassin running amok, and you joke about it.'

Purdey shuddered. 'Sometimes, Mike Gambit, your choice of words leaves a lot to be desired.'

The joke had a barb which struck home. The trio looked at each other in turn. It was Steed who finally voiced the shared thought. 'Quite,' he muttered quietly. 'Until this business is sorted out, everyone in the Department is under suspicion. We cannot afford to trust anyone ... anyone at all.'

A heavy air of gloom descended. It was too much. Steed picked up the red file and tossed it casually across

the room towards the rubbish bin, as though writing off the whole affair. 'Enough of this despondency,' he said in a deliberately frivolous tone. 'Things will be a lot better tomorrow.'

Purdey flashed him a quizzical look. 'Tomorrow, Steed? What happens tomorrow?'

Steed clucked his tongue reprovingly, affecting a pained expression. 'You'd forgotten.'

'Forgotten?' Purdey regarded him blankly, still not understanding.

Steed drew himself up proudly, beaming upon his two companions. 'Tomorrow,' he announced solemnly, 'is my birthday.'

CHAPTER TWO

'You'll need these,' Gambit said, producing a large pair of fire bellows and offering them to Steed.

Steed looked at them in puzzlement. 'Whatever for?'

Gambit's face cracked open in a wicked grin. 'To blow out all the candles,' he explained. 'Purdey is bringing in the cake.'

Steed accepted the dig in good heart. He sipped at his champagne and turned towards the door, even as Purdey entered, carrying the cake. It was decorated with a single, large candle. He smiled at Gambit. 'You reckoned without our Purdey's splendid gift of diplomacy,' he pointed

out. Turning back, he reached out and slipped his arm around the waist of his beautiful companion. 'Laura my dear, have some more crêam broulée. It's wonderful, don't you agree?'

The woman smiled up at him adoringly. 'Everything is wonderful, John,' she breathed. 'It's an excellent party.'

'Yes.' Steed glanced around the room at the small group of guests. It *was* an excellent party. Purdey and Gambit had done him proud. It was just what he had needed after the tensions and uncertainties of the past few weeks.

Purdey arrived with the cake, setting it down on the table with an exaggerated flourish. 'Now, you must make a wish before you blow out the candle,' she said, talking to him as if he *were* a child.

Steed played along. Closing his eyes tightly, he drew in a deep breath and held it for a few seconds. He extinguished the spluttering candle in one puff, opening his eyes.

Purdey looked disappointed. 'Your wish didn't come true, then,' she murmured in a disconsolate voice. Steed arched one eyebrow quizzically. 'Well, Gambit's still here,' Purdey went on, a mischievous grin breaking through the sad look she had adopted.

Mike Gambit nudged her playfully in the ribs, smiling. Purdey giggled deliciously. Steed squeezed Laura even more tightly around the waist and planted a chaste peck upon her smooth shoulder. It was a beautiful, warm, untroubled moment of shared happiness. Good friends, in pleasant and elegant surroundings. A moment to be savoured.

Something heavy crashed against the French windows,

shattering the magic of the moment along with the glass. Laura screamed, dropping her champagne to the carpet. Steed pushed himself away from her instinctively, whirling towards the source of the intrusion. Beside him, Gambit also slipped, naturally, into a guarded stance, poised on the balls of his feet to strike at whatever threatened them.

The closed curtains billowed open as the hunched figure of a man burst into the room. He staggered a few steps, then collapsed in a crumpled heap on to the carpet, clutching at his belly. Blood seeped through his fingers, dripping on to the floor.

Purdey recognised him at once. She dropped to her knees beside him. 'Terry ... for God's sake, what happened?' She prised his fingers away from his stomach, exposing the gaping hole ripped open by the passage of a Magnum bullet. 'Relax, Terry, I'll call an ambulance.'

Terry Markham's pale lips trembled, his face contorting in pain as he struggled to speak. 'No chance,' he croaked weakly. 'I've had it.'

The wounded man's eyes were already beginning to glaze over as Steed knelt beside him. 'Who, Terry?'

The dying man made a final, desperate effort. He looked up at Steed through watery eyes. 'Steed?'

Steed nodded. 'I'm here, Terry. Who shot you?'

'The double agent ... it's Felix, Felix Kane. He's making a contact tonight ... midnight ... Mildon Docks. You might ... just be in time ... to ...' The words faded into a final and complete silence. Terry Markham was dead.

Steed stood up, finishing the sentence for him. 'Catch him,' he muttered from between clenched teeth. He whir-

led on Purdey. 'Go and fetch the car, bring it round to the front of the house.' He turned to Gambit. 'You follow in yours . . . know where Mildon Docks are?'

Gambit nodded silently.

'Good,' Steed muttered, as his two companions sped away to follow his instructions. He looked apologetically towards Laura and the rest of his guests. 'Sorry the party had to end this way,' he said miserably. 'It must be the fates telling me it's time to forget my birthdays.'

He left them stunned, gazing down upon Markham's corpse. There was no time for lengthier explanations.

Purdey eased the Rover along the edge of the wharf circumventing the docks, headlights switched off. The engine purred like a cat under her precise, gentle control. Stealth was of the essence, for it had proved impossible, even with Purdey's hair-raising driving, to reach the scene before the appointed hour of midnight. Steed glanced down at the luminous dial of his watch as the minute hand crept past the hour. With a lot of luck on their side, they might just have made it in time.

Purdey brought the Rover to a halt, easing up the handbrake with a faint click. She pointed ahead through the windscreen. 'There,' she whispered softly.

Steed followed her pointing finger. Some yards ahead, the murky gloom of the deserted dock was broken by a dim pool of yellowish light from a car's side lights. Inside that pool, two shadowy figures moved.

Steed opened the passenger door stealthily, nudging Purdey to follow suit. As the doors sighed open, the in-

terior lights of the Rover went on automatically. It was an oversight on Steed's part. He cursed himself under his breath as he reached across the car towards the dashboard and snapped on full headlights. 'Now,' he shouted, throwing himself out of the car towards the nearest cover.

In the sudden glare of the headlights, the two men froze for a second, like startled rabbits. It did not last long. Just like Steed and Purdey, they were trained agents, their reflexes honed to a fine edge for their difficult and dangerous jobs. The element of surprise was quickly negated as both men reacted instinctively, breaking apart and starting a desperate race for personal survival.

Steed's voice echoed out across the quiet wharf. 'Felix? Give up, Felix, it's all over.'

The two men had disappeared into the shadows between the dockside buildings, but the flash of light from a discharged gun betrayed the position of one of them. Steed heard the bullet slam into the bodywork of the Rover. Two more shots followed, ricocheting off the metal sides of a nearby crane some five feet from Steed's head.

Felix Kane's voice drifted across to him. The man spoke without fear, or even without real surprise. Indeed, he sounded even amused by the unexpected intervention of Steed and his companions. 'John Steed ... well you always were a foxy old devil. Too damned clever by half, Steed ... that's your trouble.' A chuckle followed, chilling Steed's stomach. The same sick laugh had preceded the deaths of the other agents. Two more bullets ploughed into the side wall of the building sheltering Purdey.

'Don't forget to scream when I hit you, Purdey,' Kane's voice called out. 'I like to know these things, you see."

There was no rejoinder. Purdey was too experienced to give her exact position away. Steed hissed across to where he had last seen her dive for cover. 'Purdey? Try to skirt round and flank him. Felix is in one of his talkative moods ... it could be his fatal mistake.'

'With you, Steed,' came the whispered reply. Steed grinned to himself. The girl had already moved a good fifteen yards around in a half-circle, anticipating Steed's orders. It was a good reflection on him, Steed thought with pride. He had helped to train her well.

'Well Felix ... feel like giving up?' Steed called. 'We have you surrounded, you must realise that.'

'Gambit?' came the reply. In answer, a pair of headlights flashed briefly from the opposite side of the wharf, telling Kane what he wanted to know. Both avenues of escape were cut off. It looked like being a shoot-out or nothing.

A new voice broke the silence, guttural, thick with a foreign accent. 'Mister Steed? I am coming out. I am unarmed.'

Seconds later, a bulky figure stumbled out into the glare of the Rover's headlights. Steed's keen eyes identified him at once, for the huge shoulders and glistening bald head could belong to only one man: Anton de Salles, more commonly known by his code-name of The Dealer. De Salles dealt in money, not in death. His role in international espionage was purely as a runner, delivering payments and taking delivery of information. He was not an assassin. Shoot-outs were not his style. Steed smiled

to himself. It cut the odds down rather dramatically.

The big man walked slowly towards Steed, his arms raised high above his head. Behind him, Kane's Magnum barked twice. De Salles stiffened, his back arching as the two heavy slugs found their mark. The thudding impetus of the bullets threw his massive body a good three feet forward. He crashed, face-first to the ground, and lay still.

'The fool had served his purpose,' Kane called in explanation. 'His sole function was to bring me a sum of money . . . a very large sum of money, I might add. Now, I really must arrange my getaway, Steed. I have rather lavish plans for spending that money.'

'You haven't got a chance, Felix,' Steed shouted in reply, a little shaken by the man's air of total confidence.

A chuckle drifted across the night air. 'On the contrary, Steed, I have every chance,' Kane responded. 'You forget I know you well, Steed. Too well for your own good. I know you well enough to know that at this very minute, there is only you standing between me and freedom. You are unarmed, Steed. Purdey, who has the gun, is at this moment trying to flank me, upon your orders. She cannot get anywhere near me in time. Goodbye, Steed.'

The silence descended again, broken only by the sound of running feet. A few seconds later came the sound of a powerful car being gunned into life.

Steed stepped out from behind his cover as a pair of bright headlights carved a passage through the darkness towards him. He could only stand, helpless, as Kane's Volvo shot past him, swerved around the parked Rover, and accelerated away down the side of the wharf.

Purdey came out running. 'Tried a quick shot, no

good,' she gasped breathlessly, making for the car. She reached it a second before Steed, who bundled himself into the driving seat, slamming the door behind him. He snapped the car into life, slammed into reverse and backed down the wharf in a squealing, swerving course. Weaving erratically, Steed guided the car as best he could in the dim illumination of the reversing light, his eyes glued to the rear-view mirror seeking a space large enough to turn the car around. Finally finding one, he hauled the wheel around. The Rover slammed into a pile of packing cases with a crash of splintering wood. Slipping into forward gear, Steed slung the car around in a tight circle and screamed in pursuit of the fleeing Volvo. At the very climax of the tight turn, the front wheels of the Rover missed the edge of the wharf by a matter of mere centimetres.

Across on the opposite side of the wharf, Mike Gambit had been equally quick off the mark. As soon as Kane started to make his break, Gambit had moved into pursuit, whipping his own car round in a screaming U-turn as the fugitive agent headed for the dock entrance.

Gambit's timing was perfect, as usual. He careered out on to the main straight section of the dockside just as Kane's car left the wharf. Swinging hard on the wheel, Gambit threw the nose of his car across in a savage arc, clipping the rear of Kane's Volvo and throwing into a shattering half-turn to bring it round off course. The front wheels of the car mounted an abandoned loading ramp, shooting off at a tangent and clearing the ground by a good five feet. It landed heavily on the front wheels with a crack of shattering suspension, continuing down the edge of the dock on a weaving, erratic course.

Fifteen or twenty seconds behind them came Steed and

Purdey in the Rover, following the Volvo so clearly illuminated in the glare of Gambit's full headlights.

'He's on a strictly one-way trip,' Purdey muttered under her breath.

Steed didn't quite hear the words, but he had already come to much the same conclusion himself. Kane was driving at a suicidal pace, driven by desperation and the urge for survival. A better driver, in an undamaged car might have had a slight chance. Kane had none. Steed watched the swerving car scream in and out of the spaces between dockside cranes, container trucks and piles of half-unloaded cargo. A collision was inevitable. It was only a matter of seconds.

Gambit's car squealed to a sudden emergency stop as his quarry smashed headlong into a heavy metal bollard ahead. The Volvo seemed to bounce into the air, slewing sideways like a tinplate toy car thrown aside by a petulant child. Out of control, it smashed sidelong into a mass of heavy crates, spun away again and went into a spine-shattering speed wobble. As Gambit came to a final stop, the Volvo was just beginning to plunge towards the edge of the dock.

Steed brought the Rover to a smooth halt beside Gambit's vehicle. All three gazed intently through their windscreens, ready to see the Volvo plunge over the edge into the water at any second.

As the wheels clipped the low kerbing, Kane must have regained temporary control of the car. It swung in left, away from the immediate danger . . . and straight towards another one. The front wheels of the Volvo mounted another loading ramp at well over sixty mph, but the offside rear tyre just failed to find a purchase. The vehicle

keeled over on to its side and started to roll. It bounced over twice, with a squeal of rending metal and splintering glass, finally landing upside down on its roof and sliding across the dock in a shower of sparks which lit up the night like a firework display. It finally came to a crashing rest against a long petrol tanker.

There was a complete and utter silence for two or three seconds. Then, with unexpected ferocity, the smashed car and tanker blew up together. Steed and Purdey threw their hands up against their eyes as a blinding ball of orange and red flame erupted against the pitch-black background of the deserted wharf. A split second later, the grumbling roar of the explosion reached their ears, as thousands of gallons of fuel ignited spontaneously.

Steed lowered his hands as the initial brightness of the flash faded. He stared, shaken, at the billowing inferno. No living thing could survive within twenty yards of that all-consuming fire. Even from their own vantage point, they could all feel the radiated heat from the blaze coming through the car windscreens to warm their cheeks.

Steed sat silently for several minutes, listening to the savage crackling of the flames. Finally, he spoke, turning aside to Purdey.

'That's a powerful birthday cake you put together,' he murmured.

'Not with you, Steed.'

Steed forced a slightly shaky grin. 'You asked me to make a wish when I blew out the candles,' he reminded her. 'I wished that I could close this case.'

'Oh.' Purdey stared gloomily at the billowing black smoke issuing from the mangled wreckage. The flames had started to die down now, but a healthy orange glow

silhouetted a black, skeletal framework of what had once been a car. Not to be outdone, she put in a black joke of her own. 'It makes Felix Kane's termination file easier to fill in,' she observed. 'We just say that he was fired.'

Steed groaned. Casting one last look at Kane's funeral pyre, he engaged reverse gear and began to back down the side of the wharf.

CHAPTER THREE

As Steed so often observed, his was a business in which it did not pay to dwell upon the past. One had to know when to close the file, pack things away and forget about them. Four months had elapsed since the closing of the Kane file. Felix, and the four agents he had assassinated, were no longer in existence, nor, as far as the Department was concerned, had they ever existed at all. When it came to burying facts, the Department was exceedingly tidy, and incredibly efficient.

It had been a pleasant four months, Steed reflected. Things had been quiet, peaceful. He had been assigned to what was loosely termed 'Non-Active Service'. Basically, it meant that Steed had taken a few months off to devote himself to the simple paper work of cleaning up the Department files, supervising the appointment of replacements to make up the full strength, and devote a lot more

time to settle even more deeply into his 'cover' at the stud farm.

That had suited him fine. It had given him a lot more time to spend in the company of the delectable Laura, and much more opportunity to tend the horses he loved so dearly. Steed beamed happily as he strolled through the inner paddock. Today, he would bring the two current loves of his life more closely together.

He entered the end stable, leading out a sleek chestnut gelding, groomed to perfection. The two-year-old was one of his favourites, although a little too fine in the fetlock for his own weight and riding style. The gelding was a lady's mount ... but only a very special lady. With the animal trotting behind him on a leading rein, Steed recrossed the paddock and made his way towards the shrubbery.

Laura was waiting for him, relaxing upon a grassy patch of lawn with a half-finished magnum of Dom Perignon. She sprang to her feet excitedly as Steed trotted the gelding into view. Her eyes opened wide. 'Oh John ... for me?'

Steed smiled and nodded. 'Indeed for you,' he assured her. 'I did promise you a special treat today.'

Laura stepped up to the chestnut, stroking its smooth neck with a gentle, loving hand. 'But he's absolutely beautiful, John.'

Steed ran his own hand down Laura's back in a similar gesture of affection. 'So are you,' he whispered in her ear.

Laura turned from the horse, pressing herself against Steed. She nuzzled affectionately against his shoulder, slipping one slim arm around his waist. She looked up expectantly, her lips pursed for a kiss.

It never came. With a strange cry, Steed hurled himself

away from her towards a nearby hedge. Reaching it, he dived down and smashed his fist straight through the leafy growth, connecting with something quite solid on the other side. A dull groan came to Laura's ears, followed by a rather heavy thud. She could only look on in utter bewilderment as Steed broke into a fast sprint, making his way to the end of the hedge and round the other side. Slowly, driven by curiosity, Laura followed him.

Steed was bending over an unconscious man, sprawled out beside the hedge. His foot was drawn back, ready to deliver a secondary knockout blow to the head at the first sign of trouble.

Steed glanced up, smiling apologetically as Laura approached. 'Sorry to be so unromantic. I heard something rustling in the hedge . . . couldn't take any chances.'

The woman stared down at the unconscious man. 'A Peeping Tom?' she queried.

Steed's eyes flickered down to the man by his feet, recognising him for the first time. 'By God, you're right, my dear,' he mused. 'Well . . . a Tom, anyway.' He bent over, slipping his hand under the man's shoulder and helping him to his feet. He was just beginning to come round with a painful groan. Steed beamed as he lifted the groggy man to his feet. 'Laura, I'd like you to meet a very good friend of mine. Tom . . . Tom Fitzroy,' he said in a cheerful voice.

Laura shook her head in disbelief. The scene was justto o bizarre for words. As Steed spoke the introduction the dazed man held out a hand in a formal posture. 'Delighted to meet you,' he managed to croak out.

Hesitantly, still uncertain, Laura stepped forward and

shook the man's hand cautiously. She glanced up at Steed. 'John . . . would you mind telling me what's going on?'

'Good point,' Steed conceded. He looked at Fitzroy, who had now almost recovered himself. 'What *is* going on, Tom? Why did you sneak up on us like that? Not like you to go skulking behind yew hedges.'

Fitzroy managed a rueful smile. 'I was being discreet,' he murmured, nodding his head almost imperceptibly towards Laura. 'Reckoned without those incredible reflexes of yours, though.'

Steed allowed himself the faintest display of pride. 'I suppose they are honed to rather a fine edge,' he admitted.

Fitzroy rubbed at his chin, wincing slightly. 'Quite.' He nudged Steed very gently in the ribs. 'A word in your ear, Steed.'

'Of course.' Steed looked towards Laura, gesturing at the chestnut gelding. 'Laura my dear, why don't you take Ballybright Boy for a little run? Tom and I have some business to discuss . . . horse-dealer's talk, you understand? Secrets of the trade and all that?'

The woman smiled. 'Of course, John,' she murmured. 'Your friend Mr Fitzroy is not the only person blessed with the gift of discretion.' She moved to the horse, swinging herself up into the saddle with the practised ease of an accomplished horsewoman and took off at a brisk canter.

'Well Tom?'

'Goff,' Fitzroy said flatly. 'Frank Goff. Ring bells?'

Steed mused for a while. Finally, his face brightened.

'Distant bells, yes,' he admitted. 'Very distant bells indeed. It must be years.'

'Ten years, to be exact,' Fitzroy confirmed. 'The term of imprisonment you put him away for. It's up now, he gets out tomorrow.'

'Good for him,' Steed said brightly. 'The penitant returned to the fold and all that. So what's the problem?'

Fitzroy shrugged. 'No problem,' he admitted. 'It's just that we thought, at the Department, that you might like to be kept in touch. You might have forgotten Goff, but he might not have forgotten you. Ten years can be a long time to brood ... time enough to formulate plans of vengeance, perhaps?'

Steed considered the possibility, then dismissed it with a shake of his head. 'I very much doubt it. Frank Goff was small fry ... very small fry indeed. Even if he were harbouring a grudge, I very much doubt if he has the means or the motivation to do anything about it.'

Fitzroy let out a short, ironic laugh. 'Small fry. He very nearly killed you, Steed.'

Steed shook his head. 'Correction ... his *employer* nearly killed me. And 'nearly' is a very loose word. It leaves a lot of leeway either side.'

Fitzroy was still sceptical. 'Well, we thought it best to remind you, anyway. That whole Professor Dormeuil business was rather nasty while it lasted.'

Steed smiled wistfully as he cast his mind back ten years, remembering. 'Ay yes, the nutty professor,' he sighed. 'Dear old Domeuil. I had rather a soft spot for the old boy, you know. Him and his metal monsters. This country lost a truly brilliant mind when he died, Tom ... do you know that?'

Fitzroy laughed sardonically. 'It was a loss we could well afford,' he put in. 'Brilliant he might have been, but he was also completely deranged. That crazy plan of his ... to take over the world with those robot men ... what was it he called them?'

'Cybernauts,' Steed murmured. 'Derived from the word cybernetics ... the science of control and communication mechanisms.'

'Yes, that's right,' Fitzroy went on. 'Anyway, I for one slept sounder in my bed knowing that you had put an end to his insane scheme.'

'Oh, I don't know,' Steel murmured, grinning wickedly to himself. 'Maybe it wasn't such a crazy idea after all. Might have been quite a good thing, in a way.'

Fitzroy regarded him in horror. 'You can't be serious, Steed.'

Steed forced himself to keep a straight face. He was playing with the man, indulging his own slightly odd sense of humour. 'When you look at the state of the country today ... the economy, all that ... perhaps old Dormeuil's metal masterminds wouldn't have made a much worse job of running the country than we humans have.'

Fitzroy's eyes bored into Steed's seeking desperately for a twinkle of humour and finally finding it. He grinned with relief. 'You *are* joking, Steed. Thank Heavens for that.'

"Of course,' Steed agreed with a laugh. His face became serious again. 'Really, Tom, I don't think there is the slightest need to worry about Frank Goff. He lacked Dormeuil's fanaticism, even his homicidal tendencies. Goff was just in it for the money. I don't

think he will bear me any great grudge. But thanks for the thought, anyway.'

'Not personal, I assure you Steed,' Fitzroy said coldly. 'I only brought the matter up in the best interests of the Department. You should realise that.'

Steed smiled. 'Of course, Tom. A true blue company man. You always were and you always will be.' The statement was made as a simple declaration of fact without any slur intended. Steed accepted the value of men like Fitzroy without question. For every agent active out in the field, there had to be half a dozen faceless bureaucrats. It was the way things were.

'Well ... if you're sure there's no danger from Goff ...' Fitzroy said, a little bit rattled.

Steel nodded emphatically. 'I am,' he assured the man.

'I'll be going then.' Fitzroy turned and started to walk away. After three or four paces, he paused, turning back. 'Oh, Steed ... there was just one other little point I neglected to mention.'

'Which is?' Steed asked.

'Your little vacation ... I'm afraid it's over,' Fitzroy informed him. 'You're back on active service as of midnight tonight. I've already arranged for Gambit and Purdey to report here first thing in the morning for a briefing.'

'Ah well.' Steed shrugged. 'It was a pleasant little break while it lasted. Do we have a case to work on?'

Fitzroy allowed himself a rare grin, revelling in his chance to put one over on his colleague. 'We'll think of something,' he muttered. 'You can count on that.'

'I believe you.' Steed grinned back, showing the man that the intended jibe had failed to make an impression.

He gazed dreamily out over the fields to where Laura was exercising the chestnut. 'Until midnight, eh?' he murmured. 'I suppose I'd better make the most of it.'

Fitzroy followed Steed's eyes, noting the rhythmic rise and fall of Laura's breasts as she cantered back towards them. 'Lucky devil,' he muttered, with undisguised envy. He turned and walked off without another word.

CHAPTER FOUR

The prison doors opened with a creak of ancient hinges. A small, bespectacled man stepped out, took three paces down the gravel drive and stopped dead, blinking as the unaccustomed glare of sunlight reached his eyes. He turned his head, briefly, as the doors closed again behind him, then faced down the drive once again, staring blankly into space with the slightly bemused look of a man suddenly thrown into totally unfamiliar surroundings. After ten years, it took a little time to get used to the idea of freedom again. The open sky above, the streets which stretched ahead in his path . . . all seemed like something out of a vaguely remembered dream.

Finally, he moved, stepping forward with an uncertain, unpractised gait, as though the ground beneath each footstep was unsafe. Slowly, a state of normality returned. By the time he had reached the end of the prison drive, the man had fallen naturally into an ordinary walking rhythm. He turned left into the street, the beginnings of a

bounce in his stride. His path took him past a parked Range Rover.

"Goff? Frank Goff?' a polite voice enquired.

The little man stopped, peering into the open window of the Range Rover uncertainly. 'Yes,' he muttered, after a thoughtful pause. 'What do you want?'

The car door sighed open. Inside sat a tall, thin-faced man. He held a gun, its muzzle pointed at Goff's belly. 'Your company, Mr Goff,' said the thin-faced man, still in the polite, yet oddly expressionless voice. 'Do please get in.' He moved across into the driving seat, waving the gun slightly in a gesture of invitation.

Goff had no choice but to obey. He climbed into the passenger seat reluctantly, regarding the gun with frightened eyes.

'Good. So happy that you decided to be sensible,' murmured the thin-faced man. He reached across, locked the passenger door and slipped the gun back into his pocket. Turning the ignition key in the lock, he started the Range Rover and drove off.

Goff sat in silence for several minutes, his brain racing. Finally, sheer curiosity got the better of him. 'Who are you?' he demanded, in a slightly quavering voice. 'What do you want with me?'

The thin-faced man answered without looking at him. 'In answer to your first question, Mr Goff ... my name is Malov. It will mean nothing to you, of course. Indeed, it means little to me, since it is only one of many names I adopt purely for purposes of conversation. With regard to your second query, I regret that I am not at liberty to discuss the matter with you. If you would be good enough to show patience for a further ten minutes, I am sure my

employer will be happy to furnish you with any details you may require.' Malov lapsed into silence, his whole attitude clearly pointing to the fact that he was unwilling or unable to make any kind of conversation

Goff resigned himself to the fates, sitting back in his seat. Malov did not appear to offer any obvious threat. The gun appeared to have been used merely to capture his full attention, and had now been discarded. He did not appear to be in any immediate danger.

Some twenty minutes passed as the Range Rover headed into open countryside, finally turning off the main road into a narrow lane. At the end of the lane, Malov stopped, stepping out of the vehicle to unlock a pair of large wrought-iron gates which opened onto the gravel drive of a small private estate. He glanced up at Goff as he busied himself with the heavy padlock, patting the pocket which housed the gun meaningly. 'No tricks at this stage please, Mr Goff,' he called out. 'We have come so far together, it would be a pity to mar our relationship with a tragic accident at this point.'

Goff sat quietly, only too well aware of the deadly menace behind the thin man's soft and polite voice. He had long ago figured Malov out to be a cold-blooded killer . . . a professional.

Malov returned to the Range Rover and continued up the drive, bringing the vehicle to a halt outside the front door of a medium-sized mansion house. The gun reappeared in his hand. He waved it vaguely in the general direction of Goff's forehead. 'Out,' he snapped.

Goff complied with the request, dropping down from the Range Rover and skirting round the bonnet to join Malov near the doorway. He noticed, quite casually, that

part of the stone steps leading up to the front door had been demolished, and a rough concrete ramp had been erected in their place.

'Shall we go in?' asked Malov, in the same infuriatingly deferent tone he had used all along. He jerked the gun, indicating for Goff to ascend the ramp before him. The little man moved towards the door, acutely aware of the gun muzzle digging into the small of his back.

Reaching around his body, Malov opened the door, gesturing for him to enter. Still prodding with the gun, the man ushered Goff along a bare, uncarpeted hallway to an open doorway. 'In there,' he purred softly in Goff's ear.

Goff entered the large room, staring around him in bewilderment. The room was bare, like the hallway, utterly devoid of furniture. Even stranger, all four walls were plastered with huge life-sized blown-up photographs. Goff stared at them, fascinated. They were all of just three people; John Steed, another dark-haired, ruggedly handsome man and an exceedingly beautiful woman with fair hair.

Goff turned towards Malov, a frown creasing his forehead. 'I don't understand,' he muttered.

'You will,' Malov said flatly, pocketing the gun again. He strolled across to the nearest wall, waving his hand at the photographs. 'Recognise them, Goff?' His fingers brushed over the woman's breasts. Malov turned back to Goff, smiling. 'No, of course . . . I forgot. Steed's two new companions came after your time. You wouldn't know them.' He moved aside, jabbing his index finger against Steed's photograph. 'But you'll recognise Steed of course, won't you? Has he aged much in ten years, Mr Goff?

Does he look disgustingly healthy and well-fed, sickeningly happy with the champagne and the beautiful women and the wealth he has accumulated in the ten years you rotted in a prison cell?' Malov paused, letting the taunts sink in.

Goff turned his eyes away from Steed's photograph. It was not a face he wished to be reminded of. 'It ... it was a long time ago,' he murmured absently.

'A very long time indeed,' Malov agreed. 'Ten long, lonely years ... and Steed gave you those years, Goff. He was the one who put you away, took away everything you had, including your freedom.' Malov stared intently into Goff's cold eyes, disappointed that he had failed to stimulate the expected reaction. He changed his tack. 'Look, Mr Goff ... I am in this purely for the money ... which I might add is most generous. You play along, and I guarantee there's some in it for you, too.'

Goff started, suddenly, as the faint whirring of an electric motor came to his ears. He whirled towards the open doorway, but was completely unprepared for the sight which greeted him. Coming towards him was a battery-powered wheelchair of some kind. In it, sat a man ... or rather, the pathetic remains of something which must have been a man ... once!

The boxed-in front of the wheelchair housed the controls for the electric motor, and also covered up whatever mutilated stumps remained of the occupant's legs ... for Goff could see quite plainly that there were no sign of feet resting upon the bottom of the chair. The empty sleeve of the man's jacket showed that he had also lost his left arm. All this, Goff could perhaps have

accepted . . . but it was the man's face which chilled him, sending a shudder of horror rippling through his body.

It was not a human face. Certainly, the features were moulded into human form . . . but they were rigid, lifeless features, in some material which was plainly not human flesh. As his initial shock passed, Goff realised that he was looking at a plastic mask. Behind it, he could only imagine what scarred and mutilated horror lurked. Only the eyes, glinting through the mask's slits, betrayed any sign that there was a living human presence in the wheelchair.

A voice spoke from behind the mask. 'Please try to control your revulsion, Mr Goff. It makes me very angry. I am not a pleasant man when I am angry.'

The words had an edge of icy menace, betraying the seething hate which seemed to emanate outwards from the thing in the wheelchair. Goff forced himself to look emotionless. 'Who are you? Why have you had me brought here?'

The single arm waved in the air as his strange host spoke again. 'My apologies, Mr Goff. I would have *invited* you to my home, but I could not be sure you would come voluntarily. And I have to be sure, Mr Goff. I am a man who always has to be sure of everything. There was no choice, therefore, but to send Malov to offer you a little inducement. So, you were abducted . . . but I wish you no harm.' The voice broke off, to let out a brief, evil chuckle. 'However, I expect you find that hard to believe, so, as a sign of my good faith, I have something for you.' The arm delved beneath the control panel of the wheelchair emerging again with a thick bundle of £20 notes clasped in its hand. With a flick of the wrist, the notes

were tossed across to land near Goff's feet. He bent down quickly, scooping up the bundle of money and riffling through it.

The man in the mask spoke again. 'Oh, there's quite a generous sum there, I assure you. And there will be more . . . much more . . . if you agree to help me as I wish. You will find that I am a most rewarding employer.'

'And if not?' Goff needed to know the answer.

It came, only serving to confirm his suspicions. Malov whipped the gun from his pocket in an instant, levelling it at Goff's head and squeezing the trigger. Just to the right of Goff's ear, a small hole appeared in Mike Gambit's photograph, right between the eyes.

'Do you need an answer in words, Mr Goff?' the man in the mask asked, in a mocking voice.

Goff shook his head.

'Good, then I suggest you refresh yourself before we get down to business. Malov . . . fetch our guest a drink, would you?'

'Scotch?' Malov asked. Goff nodded. Malov left the room for a moment, returning with a cocktail trolley. He poured a healthy measure of whisky into a tumbler, added ice and handed it to the still-trembling Goff.

As he sipped at it gratefully, the man in the mask thumbed a control on his electric wheelchair, guiding it over to the wall, where he brought it to rest in front of Steed's photograph. 'We have something in common, you and I,' he hissed. 'A mutual hatred of this man . . . this cursed man.'

Goff shrugged. 'I don't hate him,' he said simply. 'Ten years is too long to bear a grudge. It's forgotten.'

'Fool!' The man in the wheelchair spat the word out at

him, in a voice filled with loathing and contempt. 'Weak, stupid little man ... do you not have the passion of hatred in you? Ten years ... ten years of your life was taken away from you by this man. Surely you must feel something against him?'

Goff didn't flinch under the scathing attack. He shrugged again. 'What's the point?'

The man in the wheelchair let out a bitter laugh. 'The point, my dear Goff, is life itself. Hatred is one of the greatest motivating forces in the world ... perhaps the greatest and most powerful emotion of them all. Only my all-consuming hate ... my dedicated malevolence ... has sustained me, kept me alive when by all accounts I should be well and truly dead. These three people did this to me ... only even greater mutilations inflicted upon their bodies can ever partially atone.' As he spoke, the man in the wheelchair clasped his wretched torso with his one good arm, hugging it. 'That is my one purpose, Mr Goff ... the single driving force which pushes me to face each bleak day.'

He broke off, realising that his angry tirade was of little importance to Goff. He snapped his fingers, calling Malov to his side. 'What face am I wearing, Malov?'

'The bland one sir,' the man answered politely.

The fingers snapped once more. 'My face of pleasure, then. I wish to express my pleasure to Mr Goff.'

Malov reached into a compartment at the back of the wheelchair, extracting a second plastic mask which he slipped into place over the mutilated face. Instead of a plain, expressionless image, the man in the wheelchair now presented a grotesque parody of a human smile ... a leering mask, with the corners of the mouth turned up

and tiny laugh-lines wrinkling the material just underneath the eye-slits. He turned to face Goff again. 'A man's face reveals his innermost thoughts, Mr Goff ... don't you agree?'

Goff could only stare at him blankly, more bemused than ever.

'And so to business, Mr Goff,' the masked man said, in a quieter, more controlled voice. 'I understand you once worked with Professor Dormeuil ... a brilliant, if misguided man who sought to control the world through the use of his cybernauts ... robot men?'

Goff nodded. 'That's right.'

'But his plan was foiled at that time by the intervention of John Steed, and his partner at that time, a Mrs Emma Peel?'

Goff merely nodded, almost imperceptibly.

The man in the wheelchair fidgeted irritably. 'Speak up, man ... answer me, yes or no.'

'Yes, that's correct,' Goff said quietly. 'Dormeuil was killed when the laboratory blew up, I escaped, but Steed hunted me down.'

The smiling mask nodded. 'That is exactly how I understand things. However, my research tells me that before he died, Professor Dormeuil had already established a storehouse of these robots ... a secret repository of his metal men which no-one could ever discover ... is this not so?'

Goff shuffled his feet nervously. He did not care to dwell upon the events of the past. 'It was rumoured, I believe,' he hedged.

'Rumoured?' The masked man's voice rose in anger. 'I have it as an incontrovertible fact ... and further, I

understand that you are the one living man who knows the location of this storehouse.'

Goff fingered his collar nervously. He was beginning to sweat. 'Look, even if I did know where these cybernauts were ... and I'm not saying that I do ... you have no idea of what those things were capable of. They belong where they are ... buried deep beneath the ground ... like monsters from Hell itself.'

'Aha!' The man in the wheelchair shouted in triumph. 'You give your secrets up too easily, Mr Goff. Now tell me ... where are the robots secreted?' He waited a few seconds for an answer. When none came, he clicked his fingers. Malov stepped beside him, holding up a third mask. It was an obscene, evil thing, the features twisted up in a grimace of seething anger. 'I am wearing my mask of pleasure, Mr Goff. Please do not force me to assume this other mask.' To add emphasis, he waved the angry face in the air.

'All right.' Goff's shoulders slumped in resignation. 'I'll tell you where the cybernauts are buried.'

'You'll do better than that, Mr Goff. You will take me there, you will reveal the robot men ... and you will teach me how to control them.'

The electric wheelchair spun around suddenly, disappearing through the open door. Goff looked after him, deeply troubled. Whoever he was, the strange masked man was obviously someone used to having his orders followed to the letter. He would not accept any argument. He looked down again at the money in his hand. It was, indeed, a generous sum. For a man just released from prison, it was also something of a godsend. However, one factor worried him above all else.

'Is he insane?' he asked, turning to the silent Malov.

Malov grinned, shrugging his shoulders in a careless gesture. 'Probably,' he admitted. 'But he pays well... and that's all I care about. If you feel disposed to taking a little bit of advice, Mr Goff... I suggest that you make it all you care about as well.'

'What happened to him?' Goff was surprised to find that Malov now seemed quite friendly and chatty. Like his employer, the man seemed more than a little schizophrenic. However, while he appeared to be in such an amiable mood, Goff intended to satisfy his curiosity.

'A fire, following a car accident,' Malov explained. 'Steed and his companions left him to die ... but he didn't, of course. He was thrown clear of the wreckage, but close enough to the flames to be horribly burned. An old alcoholic stumbled upon him, pulled him clear, and was just sober enough to telephone me. I got there in time to save his life, getting him to a private hospital where they patched him up ... at least, what they could.' Malov broke off to let out a vicious, evil laugh. 'They can be quite useful sometimes ... broken-down old winos. Apart from saving his life, this one also served to play the part of his body. I dumped him into the wreck while it was still burning. It didn't leave much to be identified, and it stopped people asking any awkward questions.'

The volunteered information told Goff one more important thing. His new employers were totally cold-blooded killers. A slight chill of fear shivered through him as he also realised that a helper became expendable the second he reached the end of his usefulness. It was something to keep in mind.

'Any other questions?' Malov asked, pleasantly.

'Who is he?' Goff wanted to know. 'What's his name?'

Malov smiled indulgently. 'Kane. Felix Kane.' He laughed again. 'And you're right, of course. He is quite mad.'

CHAPTER FIVE

'I think a few practice strokes on the driving range before we get down to business, don't you?' Steed suggested. Without waiting for an answer, he heaved his golf bag up on to his shoulder and headed towards the door.

Gambit and Purdey exchanged smiles. Steed's few weeks of soft living had done him the world of good. He was a new man, his batteries recharged. Still, he was a little reluctant to get back to work immediately. Although the trio were scheduled for a briefing at nine in the morning, Steed had showed little enthusiasm for getting down to basics much before noon. They followed him out through the French windows, across the paddock and onto his private driving range.

Steed teed up, selected a heavy wood and took a couple of practise swings. Satisfied with his poise and balance, he clouted the ball. It sailed into the air, cutting a perfect path through the air towards the nets. He grunted with satisfaction, handing the club to Purdey. 'Want to have a shot?'

She grasped the club awkwardly, bracing her feet some two feet apart as Steed teed up a new ball for her. He glanced aside at Gambit, grinning.

'Five,' Purdey shouted out at the top of her voice. She took an almighty swing at the ball, hitting it by some miraculous fluke. It sailed away at an acute angle, disappearing somewhere behind the azalea beds.

'Purdey, you're supposed to call "fore",' Gambit corrected her gently.

She shrugged, smiling sweetly. 'I'm a woman ... I claim a handicap of one,' she explained. Steed and Gambit groaned aloud.

Steed teed up for a second shot. His arms swung back, ready to sweep down.

'I say, Steed.' The shout interrupted his concentration. As the heavy club scythed down, Steed glanced up. The edge of the wood sliced the ball, sending it flying off in a left-hand curve. Gambit and Purdey watched the flight of the ball with fascination. It sailed straight towards the source of the interruption ... Tom Fitzroy, who had just appeared from the shrubbery. The flying white blur stopped dead upon contact with his forehead, dropping to the ground a mere split second before the unfortunate man's unconscious body fell beside it.

'Oh dear,' Steed muttered. He slipped the wood carefully back in his golf bag and took off towards the stricken man at a run. He bent over Fitzroy's limp form. 'I say, old chap ... are you all right?' he enquired solicitously.

Fitzroy groaned, and his eyes flickered open. 'Hello Steed,' he whispered painfully. 'It's Goff, Steed. Goff.'

'Yes, of course it is,' Steed murmured, humouring him.

He picked up the ball and brandished it under Fitzroy's nose. 'That's right, Tom . . . you're just a little delirious. You'll be fine in a moment.'

Fitzroy looked at the ball with disgust, sitting up. 'No, you don't understand, Steed . . . it's Frank Goff.'

'Oh.' Steed was a little chastened. 'What about him?'

'Something very odd seems to have happened,' Fitzroy said, climbing to his feet. 'He was due for release today . . . but for some unaccountable reason, they let him out yesterday.'

'Time off for being a good boy?' Purdey put in. Fitzroy regarded her with a look of disdain.

'It's very odd, Steed . . . he seems to have disappeared completely off the face of the earth,' Fitzroy went on. 'He was supposed to report straight to a parole officer, but he never showed up. What's more, we had Special Branch men posted everywhere to pick up his movements . . . but there's no trace of him at all. It's all very disturbing.'

'Nonsense, Tom. You're blowing this Goff thing completely out of all proportion,' Steed assured him. 'He's probably just gone to ground for a few days . . . taking time off to re-adjust to freedom.'

Fitzroy shook his head. 'No, there's definitely something ominous afoot,' he maintained. 'I feel it in my bones.'

Steed peered concernedly at the man's forehead, where a nasty egg-shaped bump was beginning to form. 'That's not the only thing you're going to feel,' he murmured sympathetically. 'You're going to have a nasty bruise there.'

Fitzroy was not in the best of moods for witty repartee.

He clenched his teeth in exasperation. 'Dammit, Steed ... I do wish you'd take this thing seriously. We're all very worried at the Department. We feel sure Goff might be after you ... or Mrs Peel.' He broke off, eyeing Steed slyly. 'By the way, where *is* Mrs Peel these days?'

Steed grinned wickedly. 'You don't know?' he asked, in a brazenly false tone of innocence.

Fitzroy realised his little subterfuge had been tumbled, and clicked his tongue with frustration. 'You know damned well we don't,' he said testily. 'When she decided to quit the Department and go into retreat, she did a damned efficient job.'

Steed chuckled. 'I trained her well,' he observed.

'You're not going to tell me where she is?'

Steed shook his head. 'Sorry, Tom ... I swore I wouldn't.'

'You also swore a grade one security oath,' Fitzroy reminded him, trying a little gentle moral blackmail.

Steed evaded the issue merely by changing the subject. 'Tell me about your theories concerning Frank Goff,' he said in a conversational tone.

'Damn you Steed,' Fitzroy said without real malice. He stormed off without another word.

For several minutes after he had gone, Steed stood still, his brow creased in a worried frown. Purdey looked at him anxiously. 'You're worried, Steed, really worried ... aren't you?'

He nodded absently. 'Yes, I am,' he admitted.

'About Goff trying to kill you?' said Gambit.

Steed stared him straight in the eyes, his eyebrows shooting up in a gesture of surprise. 'Good God, no.

I was worrying about that last slice of mine. Do you think my grip is a little bit out?'

CHAPTER SIX

Goff ran backwards, unrolling electric cable from the drum he held in his hands. He came up to where Kane sat waiting in his wheelchair, flanked by the omnipresent Malov. Goff looked back along the snaking cable to the disused quarry where he had buried the charge. 'I've used 28 lbs of gelignite,' he muttered. 'That should be enough to blow Dormeuil's concrete lid off.'

Kane chuckled delightedly. 'Good, Mr Goff . . . good. Get on with it, then.'

Goff nodded, stooping down to connect the two ends of the cable up to a detonator box. He screwed down the second terminal and lifted the plunger. 'Well, here goes.'

He thrust the plunger down. Five hundred yards away, a shower of loose shale blasted into the air. Fractions of a second later, the rolling thunder of the explosion drifted across the quiet country air, and the ground beneath their feet trembled slightly.

The dust and debris had hardly settled before Kane moved forward eagerly, guiding his wheelchair awkwardly over the rough ground, towards the area of the explosion. Goff and Malov strolled at a sedate pace slightly behind him, both sensing instinctively

that it would incur Kane's displeasure to go on ahead and reach the robot storehouse before him. Kane reached the outer perimeter of the large pit opened up by the explosion and peered expectantly over the edge.

Through the loose rubble, the outline of a large concrete structure could clearly be discerned. A flight of plain stone steps led down into the subterranean vault. Kane glanced up at Malov, his eyes glinting excitedly under the bland mask. 'Quickly ... get me down there,' he hissed, gesturing with his one arm.

Malov nodded silently, moving into position behind the wheelchair. Carefully, he lowered the cumbersome machine down the steps, followed by a nervous, somewhat hesitant Goff. They reached the bottom of the steps, where the vault opened up into a large, box-like chamber. Malov produced a large flashlight and switched it on, directing the bright beam into the inner gloom of the chamber.

Of the three men, only Goff was in the least prepared for the eerie sight which greeted them. Although the concrete vault was starkly functional, a few pieces of electronic equipment, and the odd item of furniture revealed that the place had served as a working laboratory before being sealed up as a storehouse.

Malov's jaw dropped open in awe as he played the flashlight beam around the inside of the chamber. It was oddly reminiscent of an ancient burial vault, although lacking the sickly-sweet, musty odour of long-rotted human remains. Lined up along both main walls were half a dozen shrouded figures, stood stiffly upright, as though on guard. Although inert, there was a definite emanation of menace from them.

Kane manipulated his wheelchair across the flat concrete floor of the chamber towards the nearest of the figures. Stopping, he reached out to tear away the dust-covered plastic sheeting which covered it like a burial sheet.

As Kane moved feverishly, uncovering each shrouded figure in turn, Goff found it impossible to repress a slight shudder as the gleaming bodies of the cybernauts were exposed to view. He alone knew that each shiny steel body housed a machine expressly designed to mete out death and destruction. Far from their outward appearance as some medieval knights dressed in shining armour, these were creatures of the future, deadly and soulless creatures whose sole function was to exterminate human life.

Kane uncovered the last robot and sat back to admire them all. Moving up alongside one, he reached out, caressing its shiny steel body like a lover fondling his woman. 'Beautiful,' he whispered in a choked, emotional voice. 'Utterly beautiful.'

A trace of pride overcame Goff's unease. 'Craftsmanship, that is,' he said. 'I made them . . . every one.'

'To Professor Dormeuil's specific instructions?' Kane queried.

The question implied a belittlement of Goff's contribution. He bristled indignantly. 'Maybe . . . but it was me who built them, made them work.'

Kane spun on him suddenly. 'Then you will know how to operate them, Mr Goff?'

A touch of the old misgiving came back. Goff shrugged nervously. 'Maybe . . .'

Kane's voice barked out. 'Yes or no, Mr Goff. When

will you learn that I am a man who must have straight answers?'

Goff bowed his head. 'Yes,' he whispered. 'Yes, I can teach you how to operate them.' He moved towards the cybernaut Kane had been fondling, pointing to a small control panel on the machine's steel breastplate. 'These are Mark Threes,' he explained in a quiet voice. 'They are the most complex the old professor ever designed . . . yet amazingly simple to control. They can be pre-programmed to perform set tasks with this control device, operated from a distance by radio control, or directly guided by a portable console. With that, you can manipulate them from virtually anywhere.'

'Even from a wheelchair,' Kane put in excitedly, chuckling with delight.

Goff nodded. 'Yes, even from a wheelchair,' he agreed.

'Excellent,' Kane declared. He snapped his fingers, summoning Malov. 'My beaming face, Malov. I wish to beam upon Mr Goff, express my delight with him.' Malov pulled out a clown-like mask, fashioned into an exaggerated look of rapture. Kane took it, holding it over his bland face for a couple of seconds before handing it back to Malov. 'You see, Mr Goff? You see how pleased I am with you? Now, to please me even more, you will arrange a little demonstration.'

Goff shook his head uncertainly. 'I'm not sure . . . I'll have to restore power somehow.'

'Then do it.' Kane dismissed the possibility of any problems with a wave of his hand.

Goff wandered around the chamber, muttering to himself. 'There was an auxiliary generator, I remember.

The old Prof took every eventuality into account.' He stopped, peering down at the floor to a tangle of heavy cables. 'It must be around here somewhere . . .' Following the line of the cables, he disappeared into the gloom. After a few seconds, he shouted out with satisfaction. 'Good, I've found it. Can I have some light up here, please?'

'Of course.' Kane clicked his fingers, gesturing to Malov, who moved towards Goff, pointing the flashlight beam ahead of him.

'There, that should do it,' Goff muttered thoughtfully, making a final adjustment to the control panel set in the cybernaut's steel chest. He stepped back, reaching down to pick up a small control box which bristled with switches and levers.

Kane sat impatiently, drumming his fingers upon the control panel of his wheelchair. 'Are we ready now, Mr Goff?'

The little man nodded, stepping back. He pressed a small black button on the portable console. A faint humming filled the air, growing gradually louder. 'There . . . give it a couple of seconds to build up power,' Goff murmured, his eyes firmly fixed upon the steel face of the cybernaut.

The humming died down. Goff nodded thoughtfully. 'Looks like it,' he said quietly. His fingers moved expertly over the surface of the console, flipping switches.

A gasp of awe issued from behind Kane's bland mask as the cybernaut moved. The whole steel body seemed to stiffen suddenly, vibrating very slightly as the complex

motors whirred into life. Goff pressed another button, and the robot's head began to swivel, very slowly, upon its steel neck.

The head performed a complete circle, then stopped, facing forwards once again. '360 degree sweep,' Goff explained. 'Dormeuil was proud of that little refinement. One up on us mere humans, he used to say.' He lowered the console to Kane's eye-level pointing out the tiny TV receiver built into it. On it, a clear picture of themselves showed that the television camera 'eyes' of the cybernaut were fixed upon them. 'With the aid of this screen, the operator "sees" exactly what the cybernaut is viewing,' Goff explained. 'In this way, you can guide it around obstacles, direct its path and movements almost as accurately as if you were inside the machine's body.'

'Fascinating,' Kane breathed. He pointed with a trembling finger to the control console. 'Could I?'

'I suppose so.' Goff laid the console down on Kane's wheelchair, pointing to various switches. 'Legs . . . arms . . . head . . . wrist control . . . finger and thumb movements . . . they're all clearly marked.'

Kane's fingers hovered over the controls, trembling with anticipation. He was like a child with a new and wonderful toy – eager to try it out but afraid to damage it. Gingerly, he prodded a switch, chuckling happily as the cybernaut lifted one gleaming arm into the air. Kane glanced aside at Malov, his voice rising in a maniacal scream. 'It works, Malov . . . HE works.'

Goff stood back as Kane tried each control in turn, familiarising himself with the robot's mechanical movements. In a few minutes, Kane had obtained a reasonable degree of efficiency from the machine, controlling it well

enough to make it walk several steps, turn around and flex its metal muscles. His initial delight faded slightly as he realised that the cybernaut's powers were limited. It was no more than a machine ... a poor copy of the human body. Certainly, it could perform outwardly human functions, but in a clumsy, crude manner. It was not quite what he had hoped. He looked up at Goff. 'Is this the best performance Dormeuil ever obtained from these machines?'

Goff looked at him in surprise. 'You expected more?'

'Much more,' Kane said softly. 'These clumsy machines are far from being delicate enough to suit my purpose.' He fingered the controls, making the robot walk the length of the chamber, turn and come back. 'Look how stiffly and jerkily they move. There is no fluidity ... no grace.'

Goff laughed, despite the angry tone in Kane's voice. 'You're asking for miracles,' he scoffed. 'They're machines ... not real men. You can't expect a hunk of machinery to perform like a ballet dancer.'

Kane's voice dropped to a chilling tone. 'Oh, but I can expect that, Mr Goff. I can and I do expect that.'

Goff shook his head. 'Not from these,' he said flatly. 'They can imitate most of a man's normal movements, but that's as far as it goes.'

'Then you must improve them,' Kane told him. 'You must modify Professor Dormeuil's designs, adapt them to suit my needs.'

Goff stared at him incredulously. 'These are the most sophisticated pieces of machinery ever built,' he protested. 'What you seem to dismiss as crude and clumsy movement is a technological miracle in itself.'

There was a long silence. Finally, Kane spoke in little more than a whisper. 'Are you telling me you are incapable of improving these machines?'

Goff was on the defensive at once. 'That's the finest piece of engineering you'll ever see. Dormeuil himself praised my work highly. No man could have done a better job of precision engineering than I achieved with these Mark Three machines.'

'But you are not good enough to progress the design any further?' Kane pressed.

'Of course not,' Goff snapped. 'To do that, you'd need an even greater genius than Dormeuil himself . . . someone involved in the very latest developments in cybernetics, micro-circuitry, mathematics.'

'An expert, in other words?' Kane muttered. 'Not just a crude mechanic like you?'

Goff flushed with anger. 'I'm an engineer,' he protested. 'A fine engineer . . . one of the best.'

Kane shook his head. 'A simple mechanic,' he repeated. 'A little man in greasy overalls.' As he spoke, he fingered the control console, setting up a precise programme of action. The cybernaut's steel arm shot up, its hand reaching out towards Goff's neck. Steel fingers closed around the man's throat.

Goff screamed in terror. 'I helped you . . . I did what you wanted . . . I was promised money.'

'Yes, you did help me,' Kane agreed. 'And I thank you for that, Mr Goff. However, since you are now of no further possible use to me . . .' He did not bother to finish the sentence, merely jabbing his finger down upon a control button and holding it down.

Goff's screaming ceased abruptly as the inhuman

fingers tightened around his throat, crushing his windpipe. His eyes bulged horribly as the incredible steel strength of the robot hand choked the life out of him. He struggled briefly, then jerked and was still. A ghastly rattling sound sounded in his throat. Goff was dead.

Kane released the button. The cybernaut's steel fist opened, dropping Goff's lifeless form to the ground. Kane wheeled his chair around in a half-circle, facing Malov, who had watched the entire episode with an expressionless face. 'We must cast our net elsewhere, Malov,' Kane muttered.

'Indeed we must, sir,' the man agreed. He glanced down at Goff's corpse. 'A pity he was unable to help us any more.'

Kane waved his hand, dismissing any regrets. 'He served his purpose well enough. But he was basically a weak man ... and weak men talk. I could not afford to let him live.' His eyes flashed beneath the mask. 'Besides, my new toys needed some exercise after their ten-year sleep.'

Malov continued to stare at the body impassively. 'What do you want me to do with him?' he asked.

'Dump him somewhere ... a long way away,' Kane replied carelessly. 'But later. First we must get three of these machines back to the house. Then you can return here and tidy up ... cover up our traces. It is a serious mistake not to cover up one's traces, Malov.'

'Of course.' Malov moved into position behind the wheelchair, preparing to manhandle the vehicle back up the stairs.

Kane shooed him away with a wave of his hand. 'I have other servants now, Malov,' he reminded his col-

league. 'We shall let them do the donkey work from now on.' As he spoke, he fingered the controls on the console. The cybernaut whirred into life, lumbering across to stand behind the wheelchair. As Kane pressed two more switches, the robot stooped down, lifting the wheelchair bodily in its powerful steel arms. Kane chuckled delightedly as the metal monster clanked up the stone stairs effortlessly.

Several hours later, Malov brought the green Range Rover to a halt on a hill overlooking a small wooded copse. Climbing out, he strolled casually around to the rear of the vehicle, opened it, and dragged Goff's body out by the feet. As a pure afterthought, Malov stooped down and took the bundle of money from the dead man's pocket, transferring it to his own. His employer was not ungenerous with his payment, but a little bonus was never to be sniffed at. Kane himself would already have forgotten about the money. Such things were unimportant to him. Only his eventual purpose mattered.

With a callous kick, Malov pushed Goff's corpse off the top of the slope. It rolled down clumsily, finally coming to rest half-hidden in a clump of gorse, staring up at the blue sky through sightless eyes.

Malov got back into the Range Rover and drove off without looking back.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Gambit awoke from a heavy sleep, groaning miserably as the shrilling doorbell drove away the last wispy memory of Purdey performing the dance of the seven veils. Scrambling from his bed, he wrapped his naked body in a silk robe and staggered to the door.

Purdey stepped in smartly as he opened the door, bestowing a withering look upon him. 'Good afternoon,' she murmured sarcastically.

Gambit looked at his watch, groaning again as he realised it was just past eight in the morning. 'I liked you better when you were dancing,' he muttered thickly. The cryptic comment went over Purdey's head. She did not pursue it.

Striding into Gambit's lounge, she perched herself prettily upon the arm of the sofa, crossing her knees. 'We have a couple of problems,' she announced.

Gambit regarded her scornfully. 'Correction ... I'm the one with the problems,' he informed her. 'One is lack of sleep, and the other is strange ladies bursting into my flat at weird hours of the morning.'

Purdey ignored his complaints. 'Get out of that robe, Mike Gambit,' she said in a brisk and businesslike voice.

His eyes widened in amazement. 'Purdey ... a girl with your looks ... having *that* problem? I never guessed.'

She flashed him a scathing look. 'I mean get dressed at once,' she snapped. 'We have to get over to see Steed at once.'

'I'll just go into the bedroom,' Gambit said, the disappointment showing on his face.

Purdey leapt to her feet, standing in his path. 'Oh no you don't,' she told him. 'I'm up to your tricks. If I let you go back into that bedroom, you'll lock the door and go back to bed. You take that robe off now ... right here.'

'OK.' Gambit shrugged, his fingers straying to the ties around his waist. 'I might just warn you that I never wear pyjamas,' he added, in a teasing voice.

Purdey jumped away from him hastily. 'Go into the bedroom and change,' she corrected quickly.

He grinned, sloping off into the bedroom muttering under his breath. 'You could have at least turned up two minutes later. You were down to the last veil.' He closed the bedroom door behind him and began to dress.

'First problem,' Steed said, after he had ushered them both into the study and poured black coffee from a piping percolator.

Purdey sipped at her cup, then placed it on the floor. 'The first problem is Frank Goff ... the man Fitzroy was worried about.'

Steed found it difficult to raise any enthusiasm. He was tired of hearing the man's name. 'Goff ... what now?' he asked, wearily.

'He's dead,' Purdey announced. 'Very dead indeed.'

'Ah!' Steed was instantly alert. He sat upright in his chair. 'How was he killed?'

'The easy answer is to say he was choked to death,' Purdey answered. 'But there are complications.'

'Complications?' Steed wasn't quite with her.

Purdey nodded. 'It's all very odd. The lab report says it looks like he was mangled up in some sort of machinery,' she said. 'His throat was completely crushed . . . even his spinal vertebrae were splintered . . . like his neck had been slowly pulverised in some sort of metal vice.'

'Run over, perhaps?' Gambit speculated.

Purdey shook her head. 'Impossible. There is no logical explanation to fit in with his injuries.'

'There is one,' Gambit retorted. Both Purdey and Steed glanced at him expectantly. 'Someone put his neck in a metal vice,' he finished, rather lamely.

Purdey sniffed in disgust. 'I should have let you go back to sleep,' she said, ignoring him.

'What about the second problem,' Steed interjected, before his two companions had a chance to start up one of their recurrent feuds.

'That is more complicated . . . and more serious,' Purdey said, snapping instantly back to her businesslike voice. 'They had a break-in at the Hanmore Ministry of Defence Establishment last night.'

'They had a what?' Steed was frankly incredulous. 'That place is one of our most top-secret establishments. They're supposed to have every security device going. It's reckoned to be invulnerable.'

'Not any more,' Purdey said. 'A file was stolen.'

Steed rose from his chair, pacing the room. 'I can't

understand this at all,' he murmured in a worried voice. 'It's unthinkable that anyone could break in there. The whole place is surrounded by a twenty-foot-high electric fence, for a start.'

'With a seven-foot-high hole torn in it,' Purdey put in.

'It was cut, you mean?' Steed asked.

Purdey shook her head. 'Torn,' she repeated firmly. 'There was no sign that any form of cutter, or thermic device was used. The hole was literally torn through ... and the wire in that fence is top-grade steel, three-eighths of an inch thick.'

'All right ... the inner doors to the main building ... how did they get through those?' Steed wanted to know. 'Dammit, I've seen those things ... they wouldn't look out of place on a bank vault.'

Purdey shrugged, equally mystified. 'They were ripped off their hinges, nobody even dares to hazard a guess how.'

'Internal security alarms?' Steed finished, weakly.

'Didn't go off,' Purdey said. 'The most modern and up-to-date heat sensors are used throughout Hanmore. They can detect the presence of any unauthorised intruder by body-heat. For some reason, they just were not working last night.'

'What about the guards?' Steed muttered in desperation. 'Didn't they notice anything?'

Purdey shook her head again. 'After the theft was discovered, they even brought in tracker dogs. They couldn't pick up a trail.'

Steed slumped down into his chair again, his forehead creased in a frown. He was silent for several minutes. Finally, he shook his head in bewilderment. 'It just

doesn't make sense,' he said. 'The file which was stolen . . . was it very important?'

'There again, another funny thing,' Purdey said. 'The file was secret, of course . . . but nothing of great value. It was merely a list of our current physicists, and a brief rundown on their fields of research at the present moment. The really odd factor is that to get to that file, the thief had to sort through at least a dozen other files which were a hundred times more important. Some of them contained precise details of some of our most top secret projects. Any one of them would have been worth millions to a foreign power . . . yet nothing else was touched.'

Steed was utterly stumped . . . and it showed. 'Are there any leads at all?'

Purdey shook her head. 'None.'

Steed fell into deep thought again, running the facts through his keen mind, seeking a link . . . any link, no matter how tenuous. There was only one . . . yet it belonged in the past, to a matter which had been well and truly finished a decade ago. Nevertheless, he voiced it. 'When do the experts think Goff died? Before or after the raid on Hanmore?'

'Well before,' Purdey answered. 'Probably the previous evening. Why do you ask?'

Steed shook his head, the vague theory already blown by her answer. 'It was an idea,' he said slowly. 'Just an idea. Goff just might have pulled off that break-in . . . if he had been alive, and had a certain help.'

'Help? What help?' Gambit asked, sensing that for a second, Steed had been on to something.

'The help of another dead man,' Steed answered cryptically. 'Amongst other things.'

Purdey and Gambit looked at each other, each shrugging. One could only hazard the wildest guesses when Steed chose to be so secretive.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Felix Kane ran through the stolen file for the fourth time, coming to the same conclusion as the last two. There was only one name on the list of top scientists which really appealed to him. 'Professor Mason,' he muttered aloud. 'Professor Steven Mason.'

Malov, hovering nearby, glancing aside at him with vague interest. 'You have found what you were looking for?'

Kane chuckled. 'Indeed I have, Malov. I have found another guest I would very much like to invite to my home.'

Malov smiled knowingly. 'Another *unwilling* guest, sir?'

Kane waved his single arm in the air. 'Alas, it may prove so,' he admitted. 'Therefore we shall have to be especially hospitable . . . offer the finest inducements. Do you follow me, Malov?'

The man cackled with laughter. 'I think I do, sir.'

'Good.' Kane tossed the file across to him. 'Go to it, Malov. See that Professor Mason is in no position to refuse my hospitality.'

'At once,' Malov answered obediently, moving towards the door. Kane watched him depart, sitting silently in his wheelchair for several minutes. Finally, he set the machine into motion, gliding across the floor to the wall, where one of the cybernauts stood immobile. Kane looked up at the inert machine through the eyeholes of his bland mask. It did not suit his mood. Quickly, he selected the smiling face and slipped it into position, beginning to talk to the steel creature as though it were truly a living thing, an intelligent being.

'I called you clumsy ... yet you have served me well,' he said. 'Perhaps I was hasty in my judgement ... so I will apologise. No mere man could have done what you did ... get into a top secret establishment and get out again without detection.' As he spoke, Kane began to twiddle the controls on his portable console. With the now familiar humming sound, the cybernaut came to life. 'Walk, my friend,' Kane cried out in glee. 'Exercise those powerful legs of yours.' Guiding the machine into actions to suit his words, Kane marched the cumbersome robot up and down, watching every movement through glinting eyes. 'Ah yes ... walk, my friend ... walk.'

His voice rose in an insane scream as the cybernaut continued to move around the room, stomping along with a metallic sound against the bare floor. Kane turned the controls up to maximum, pushing the machine to its maximum speed and power, chuckling exultantly as it passed to and fro. All the while, he was still conducting a one-way conversation with the metal monster. 'We are an unbeatable pair, you and I,' he told the robot. 'Your mobility and strength ... my brilliant brain. Together, we are greater than a machine, more powerful than any man.

Nothing can stop us . . . we are invincible. Soon, we shall be even closer together . . . and then . . .'

Kane's voice tailed off. The hope clashed with the reality, bringing him savagely back to earth. He snapped off the controls in disgust, bringing the cybernaut to an abrupt halt. Beneath the smiling mask, his eyes flashed hate. 'No. You mock me,' he hissed, glaring at the now motionless machine. 'No matter how clumsily you walk . . . you still mock this useless body, these remnants of a man. You are just a machine, after all . . . a mindless mechanism.'

He wheeled away from the cybernaut quickly, the moment of insane excitement forgotten. Leaving the room, he went to formulate his plans before Malov returned from his mission.

'You have what is needed?'

Malov nodded, grinning wickedly. 'Just the thing,' he said quietly. 'Professor Mason cannot humanly refuse to help us.'

'Excellent.' Kane's eyes twinkled beneath his bland mask. 'Now all we have to do is go and pick him up. You have reviewed the security precautions?'

'Of course. His work at home will be our best bet. The house is surrounded by a plain metal fence . . . not electrified . . . and there are two armed guards patrolling the grounds. Inside the house, I am not sure . . . perhaps one more guard, possibly two.'

Kane hummed thoughtfully. 'A very important man, our friend the professor. He is well guarded.'

'Too well guarded?' Malov said doubtfully.

Kane chuckled. 'He is guarded against an attack by a man, Malov.' He broke off to nod towards the motionless cybernaut. 'We have a little bonus in that direction.' He thumbed the controls, causing the robot to draw back its metal fist. With a flick of a switch, Kane released the pent-up power in the cybernaut's steel arm. With a sharp crack, it punched a neat hole in the wall. 'You see what I mean, Malov?'

Malov looked at the damaged wall in awe. It was an impressive demonstration. 'I do, sir,' he murmured quietly.

'Shall we go, then?'

Malov nodded. 'I'll go and bring the car round to the front of the house. Will you be all right, sir?'

Kane pointed to the cybernaut. 'My new servant will escort me.' As he spoke, he fingered the controls, bringing the machine up to his wheelchair. As Malov left to fetch the Range Rover from the garage, the cybernaut began to wheel Kane towards the door.

Malov parked outside the front door, dropping the metal ramp at the rear of the vehicle. Effortlessly, the cybernaut wheeled Kane into position, then stooped over to crouch down upon the floor of the vehicle. Malov covered the motionless form with a blanket and locked the wheels of Kane's chair into position before returning to the driving seat. 'A little social call upon Professor Mason,' he announced, setting the Range Rover into gear.

CHAPTER NINE

Gambit and Purdey sat on opposite sides of Steed's dining room table, idly toying with the scrabble board between them.

'Steed has got something at the back of his mind. He's worried,' Gambit observed.

'And he doesn't usually worry,' Purdey agreed, nodding. 'It's a distinctive feature of the man.'

'Which means . . .'

'He really is worried,' Purdey finished for him. 'And I have a vague idea what he is worrying about.'

She chose a handful of extra scrabble letters from the box, pushing them around in her palm. Carefully, she selected the ones she needed and dropped them into position on the board, swivelling it around so that Gambit could read it.

He looked at the single word Purdey had spelled out thoughtfully, finally glancing up at her quizzically. 'S-I-G-H-B-E-R-N-O-O-R-T?' he questioned. 'That's not how you spell the word. It's C-Y-B . . .'

'I know how to spell it,' Purdey interrupted, her beautiful eyes flashing. 'But this way, I get a triple word score.'

Gambit grinned, appreciating the joke. 'Purdey, you are priceless,' he admitted. 'I'll bet you even cheat at soli-

taire.' His face became more serious. 'But really ... you've come to the same conclusion?'

Purdey nodded, equally serious. 'So you checked over those old files as well?'

'Yes,' Gambit said quietly. 'And I'm pretty sure Steed did too.'

'It all fits,' Purdey said flatly. 'Frank Goff ... Fitzroy's concern for Steed and Mrs Peel ... the damage done at Hanmore. No matter which way you spell it out, it adds up to cybernauts ... and Professor Dormeuil.'

'... Who is dead,' Steed put in, walking into the room at that precise moment.

Gambit and Purdey glanced up in surprise. 'There's no doubt about that?' Gambit queried.

Steed shook his head firmly. 'Absolutely no doubt at all. Dormeuil is dead all right. I saw it with my own eyes ... I was less than three yards away from him when the equipment blew up. I dragged his body out of that laboratory myself ... I saw it half-dissected at the autopsy afterwards. Poor old Dormeuil is as dead as anyone has a right to possibly be.'

'So we're left with the cybernauts,' Purdey put in. 'Steel robots.'

'Man made, man-shaped,' Gambit added. 'A radio-controlled walking missile. Capable of smashing down steel doors, tearing through electrified fences, running rough-shod over any kind of guard ... and impervious to bullets. An extermination machine.'

'They *can* be beaten,' Steed interjected, cutting through the air of gloom.

Gambit regarded him sceptically. 'Not strictly true, Steed,' he pointed out. 'You and Mrs Peel didn't beat the

cybernauts ... you merely beat the man who was controlling them. The machines themselves damn nearly killed you ... it's all in the file.'

Steed's face fell. 'Ah ... you've been reading between the lines,' he muttered, disappointed that his attempts at optimism had been seen through so easily.

'Nevertheless, a good point,' Purdey cut in. 'Which really brings us to the hub of the matter ... who *is* controlling these things?'

'And, for that matter, where have they come from,' Gambit added. 'If Dormeuil is dead ... who has recreated his metal monsters? Frank Goff?'

Steed shook his head. 'He didn't have the skill ... and he certainly didn't have the time,' he pointed out. 'The only possibility is that Goff knew where one or more of old Dormeuil's creations were cached away. There was a vague rumour, after the old boy's death.'

'Was it ever investigated?' Gambit wanted to know.

Steed nodded. 'Oh, of course. The Department are very thorough. They put a top agent on to the case ... he sniffed around for three months, finally coming to the conclusion that there was no basis to the story.'

'Who conducted the investigation?' Purdey asked. 'He might have missed something ... something we could follow up on now, perhaps pick up a lead.'

'The agent was Felix Kane,' Steed said. 'Before he turned rogue, of course. And Felix is dead, as well.'

'Dead ends all round,' Gambit observed, laconically. 'But a very live danger.'

'Agreed,' Steed muttered. 'The point is, we have to start somewhere. I suggest we act upon the basis that my

theory is fundamentally correct ... that Dormeuil secreted one or more cybernauts before his death, Goff knew their location, and some mystery third party prised that information from him, killing him immediately afterwards.'

Gambit nodded thoughtfully. 'Yes, I'll go along with that,' he said quietly. 'Purdey?'

She shrugged. 'We don't really have a lot of choice ... do we?' she said hopelessly.

'We're agreed on that, at least,' Steed said. 'So all we can do is to start playing guessing games. Any bright ideas as to what might be the next move?'

'It must have something to do with that stolen file,' Purdey mused. 'Someone on that list is in danger ... deadly danger.'

Steed nodded miserably. 'I'd already come to that conclusion. The question is ... who? There were thirty-six names on that list ... the cream of Britain's physicists, each one working on a top secret project of vital importance to our national security. The intended target could be any one of them.'

'We'd better start checking them all out at once,' Gambit suggested, adopting a positive approach.

Steed sighed heavily. 'Care to go and find a pin?

Purdey arched her eyebrows. 'Pin, Steed?'

'Well, we might as well approach this problem on the same basis as Gambit picks his horses,' Steed responded.

'But he always loses,' Purdey objected.

'Exactly,' Steed said. 'That's my point entirely. Three into thirty-six goes twelve. That's odds of 12 to 1 against us picking the right victim. My view is that whoever we

are dealing with is already on the move. Our chances of choosing the right target and then getting to them before our enemies are virtually hopeless.'

Purdey looked grim. 'But we can't just sit and wait,' she protested. 'We have to do *something*.'

Steed regarded her pensively. 'All suggestions will be extremely warmly received,' he murmured.

Purdey opened her mouth, but no words came out. The trio regarded each other blankly. There was a long, and rather pointed silence.

CHAPTER TEN

Malov pulled the Range Rover up to a silent halt and switched off the engine. Winding down the side window, he gazed across a patch of open common land to a large house, partially shrouded by trees. 'That's it,' he muttered quietly, turning to Kane.

Kane picked up a pair of field-glasses, training them upon the house. Through them, he could clearly see the massive iron gates which formed the first line of defence. Just inside them stood a uniformed guard, armed with a double-barralled shotgun. 'You or I would have little chance of getting in there, Malov,' he murmured. 'But I don't think our friend will experience too much difficulty in performing his task.'

Malov nodded, stepping out of the car and skirting around to the back. He lowered the ramp as he opened the rear door. 'Are you ready, sir?'

'Quite ready.' Kane stabbed the black button, rousing the immobile cybernaut. It sat up jerkily, starting to slide down the ramp as Malov tugged at its steel legs. Once on the ground, it stood upright. Kane manipulated the controls, making the machine stretch both arms out in front of itself.

Malov reached inside the Range Rover, pulling out a long black overcoat. He slipped the garment over the glinting metal body, buttoning it carefully. Afterwards, he completed the rough disguise with a thick woollen scarf and a wide-brimmed hat, standing back to admire his handiwork.

'Ah yes,' he muttered with satisfaction. 'He looks almost human . . . at a quick glance. By the time he gets close enough to alarm the guard . . . it will be too late.'

Kane chuckled delightedly. 'Good . . . excellent.' He manipulated the controls, sending the bulky figure lumbering across the common towards Professor Mason's house.

'This is a security establishment. Do you have official business here?' called the guard as he spotted the black-swathed figure approaching the huge gates.

There was no answer. The guard moved towards the gates cautiously, squinting at the dim figure. It was late afternoon, and the light was starting to fade, but there was something distinctly odd about the big man in black, the guard felt.

He swung his shotgun up into position as he reached the gates, slipping off the safety catch with his thumb. 'What's your business here? What do you want?' he repeated, a little nervously. Close up, the man was even bigger than he had estimated. He was well over seven feet tall, and incredibly large around the chest. A veritable giant of a man!

He peered upwards, trying to get a clear look at the intruder's face. The man's head was bent sideways, and swathed in a scarf so that his features were not clear. He stood absolutely still, strangely stiff and rigid.

The perplexed guard waved the shotgun menacingly. 'Answer at once,' he warned. 'I have orders to shoot on suspicion.' It was a lie, but the guard felt that a little bit of bluff might not be out of place. There was a definite air of menace about the strange visitor.

The big man's arms moved. The guard looked down in utter disbelief as two shining steel hands appeared out of the overcoat sleeves and clamped around the solid steel bolt between the two gates. He fell back, a strangled cry dying in his throat as the scarf fell away from the man's face, revealing an inhuman metal mask. In terror, he pulled both triggers of the gun, screaming in agony above the noise of the twin blast as a shower of lead pellets bounced harmlessly off the robot's steel frame and tore into his own flesh. Blinded, unconscious ... the wretched guard was spared further pain as the massive iron gates were torn bodily from their mountings and thrown down upon him, crushing him into the gravel drive.

The cybernaut lumbered over him, moving towards the house with a slow, relentless gait.

The blast of the shotgun had alerted the second external guard. He came running round the right wing of the house, prepared for trouble. He was not prepared for a cybernaut! The massive figure which stepped forward to confront him was something out of a science-fiction horror film. The guard froze in sheer terror. His fear cost him his life. The machine reached out, plucking the shotgun from his hands and bending it into a twisted metal knot in its powerful hands. Dropping the useless gun, the cybernaut swung back its arm. The air was cleaved with a sharp, vicious swishing noise as the robot arm slashed forwards again, in a whip-like blur of movement. The blow caught the guard just above the waist, lifting him several feet into the air and depositing his body in the shrubbery which lined the drive. Under Kane's guidance, the cybernaut carried on towards its target.

'It really is intolerable, trying to work under these conditions,' Professor Mason complained loudly.

The remark solicited little sympathy from the armed guard stood at his laboratory door. 'Experiment not going well, professor?' he muttered, not really interested.

Mason turned to face him, glowering at the man's stupidity. 'You know damned well what I mean,' he accused angrily. 'How is a man supposed to concentrate with people like you standing right behind him. All this secrecy ... this soundproofed room ... the guards outside. It's all too much.'

The guard shrugged. 'I've got my orders, sir,' he murmured by way of apology. 'We're only here to protect you, you know.'

'Protect me?' Mason grunted sceptically. 'Keep me prisoner is more like it. That's what I am . . . a damned prisoner . . . and you're my gaoler.'

The guard shook his head. 'You're not a prisoner, Professor Mason. You're a very important man . . . you have to be looked after, protected.'

'Protected? Against what?'

'Anything . . . and everything,' the guard answered. 'We live in troubled times, professor. We must be ready to expect the unexpected, and to defend ourselves against all forms of attack.' He leaned back against the door. 'Anyway, I'm sorry if I bother you.'

'You *do* bother me,' Mason grumbled, turning back to his work. 'Breathing down my neck, taking away any sense of privacy.'

The guard sensed that his charge's angry tirade was over. He relaxed, settling back into the routine boredom of his job. Thinking about it, he had to concede that Mason did have a point. In the six weeks he had been on guard duty, absolutely nothing out of the ordinary had happened. It must be a little trying, having to work with an armed guard always standing a few feet behind you. Very off-putting, that could be. Still, there was the other side of the coin to consider. It was not much fun for him, either, standing around for hours on end, with no conversation to speak of and absolutely nothing to divert him. The guard glanced at his watch. Only just over an hour to go on this shift, then he could hand over to one of his colleagues. Only an hour, but it would probably seem three times as long. Time dragged in this job. Just standing around, with nothing happening.

He never heard the splintering crash as the heavy

sound-proofed door shattered behind him. A steel fist punched neatly through it, level with the back of his head. The blow knocked him cold instantaneously. Poleaxed, the guard fell face-first to the floor without so much as a grunt of pain.

Professor Mason whirled in his swivel chair at the unexpected noise. He gazed, transfixed with terror as the gleaming steel fist slowly withdrew from the smashed door panel. Seconds later, a second blow came crashing through, removing the entire door panel. Two more in quick succession took off the entire top half of the door. Through the gap, Mason set eyes on the impassive steel face of the cybernaut for the first time, and his bones turned to a freezing jelly as the giant robot burst into the room.

Mason was incapable of flight or fight as the robot lumbered slowly across the room to his chair and cuffed him heavily against the side of the head. He slumped in his chair, stunned.

Kane cackled with glee as the cumbersome bulk of the cybernaut re-appeared in view. It lumbered heavily down the drive towards the shattered gates, cradling the limp form of Mason in its mighty arms as though he were an oversized rag doll. Kane turned to his confederate exultantly. 'You see, Malov? They were prepared for men . . . weak, mortal men,' he crowed. 'What a pity no-one told them that they are no longer dealing with men. Soon, Malov, they will have even more to fear. With Professor Mason's help, I shall create the most deadly killing machine they have ever known.'

Malov watched in silence as the cybernaut delivered Mason's unconscious body to the rear of the Range Rover. There were times he did not care to share in his insane employer's enthusiasm.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The telephone rang. Steed jumped across the study, snatching it from its rest. He listened intently for a few moments, saying nothing. The worried frown creasing his forehead betrayed the fact that it was not good or welcome news. Finally he spoke, in a firm, commanding tone. 'All right . . . we'll be there as soon as possible. I want nothing touched . . . do you understand, nothing?' He slammed the receiver back into place, whirling on Gambit and Purdey.

'Trouble?' Gambit asked.

'Trouble,' Steed confirmed. 'We know now who the target was. Professor Steven Mason. His home was attacked a few minutes ago.'

'Dead?' asked Purdey.

'Abducted,' Steed answered. 'For what purpose, we can only guess.'

'I'll get the car,' Gambit muttered, turning on his heel and moving at the double.

Steed and Purdey snapped into life behind him. Seconds later, the quiet countryside around Steed's stud

farm was broken by the squeal of tyres against gravel, as the Rover sped into the gathering night.

Steed's keen eyes took in every inch of the laboratory, finally coming to rest upon the shattered door. 'Well, whoever it was certainly wasn't invited in,' he observed.

'Whoever ... or whatever?' Purdey said heavily. 'This more or less confirms the cybernaut theory, doesn't it?'

'Perhaps,' Steed muttered. He still didn't want to believe it

Purdey turned on Gambit. 'Mike ... could *you* have punched that hole in the door?'

He shook his head doubtfully. 'I don't know ... I certainly don't think so.'

'There you are.' Purdey whirled on Steed triumphantly. 'If Gambit couldn't have done it, then no man could.'

Gambit flushed a little under the implied compliment. 'Look, I didn't exactly say that.'

'You didn't have to,' Purdey snapped back. 'I've seen you karate chop building bricks for breakfast exercise. You're the best there is, Mike.'

Gambit shook his head modestly. 'No ... just the best you've seen,' he murmured. He inspected the damaged door more closely, hitting a relatively undamaged portion a couple of times experimentally. 'Mind you, I think you're right,' he muttered. 'I'm pretty sure no human hand did this.'

Steed turned from Mason's desk as Tom Fitzroy strode into the lab. 'Tom. Any chance of the guard saying anything?'

Fitzroy shook his head. 'He's in a deep coma ... likely

to remain unconscious for a couple of days. He might not ever recover.'

'The outside guards?'

'Both dead,' Fitzroy said, bitterly. 'The first one is peppered with buckshot from his own gun . . . as though he'd fired at point-blank range on to a solid object. Apart from that, he was crushed underneath the gates. They were torn right away from their supports. The second guard has his ribcage smashed in as though he's been hit by a truck. One of the broken ribs penetrated his heart.' His shoulders slumped. 'You know what we're up against, don't you Steed?'

'Yes. I know,' Steed answered moodily. 'I know only too well.'

'Any leads?' Fitzroy asked hopefully.

'Nothing,' Steed admitted. 'It might help when I can find out more about Mason. What was his specialist field?'

'Well, cybernetics, of course . . .' Fitzroy started.

Steed cut in irritably. 'I know that, Tom. But what specific research was he currently engaged upon?'

Fitzroy shook his head. 'I can't tell you that, Steed. Absolutely hush-hush, five-star file stuff.'

Steed's face clouded over. 'God dammit, Tom . . . we're both fully sanctioned Department men. Surely we can dispense with the red tape, just for once.'

Fitzroy looked apologetic. 'It's not that, Steed. I can't tell you because I don't know myself. Professor Mason's work really was under wraps . . . it's going to take a request to the Home Office . . . in triplicate . . . to clear this one.'

'Bureaucracy!' Steed snapped testily. 'Every minute we waste, Mason's life is in jeopardy. These people we're

dealing with have already quite adequately demonstrated that human life means absolutely nothing to them. Nothing at all.'

'I'll process the application as fast as I can,' Fitzroy assured him, fully sympathizing with his colleague's frustration. 'But I'm going to need a hefty pair of scissors to cut this particular length of red tape. Whatever Mason was working on was so secret that perhaps even HE didn't know himself.'

Steed looked disgusted. 'Well *I* want to know,' he said firmly. 'And not later than first thing tomorrow morning.'

'Don't see it, Steed,' Fitzroy muttered doubtfully. 'Official channels, and all that.'

Steed dismissed his objections with a wave of his hand. 'You go through the proper channels, Tom. I'm going to take a few short cuts. Where was Mason based before they transferred his work to his own home?'

Fitzroy shifted his feet awkwardly. 'I'm laying my job on the line even telling you that,' he said, uncertainly.

'Your job ... or Mason's life?' Steed said, with heavy irony.

Fitzroy capitulated. 'All right Steed ... Professor Mason was working at Purlington until six weeks ago. And that's all I can tell you.'

'It'll do,' Steed said, with a faint sigh of relief. 'Thanks, Tom.' He turned back to Gambit and Purdey. 'I'm going to drive down to Purlington first thing in the morning. Right now, I suggest you two go and follow up the one slim lead we have.'

'Lead ... what lead?' Gambit looked at him blankly.

'J. B. Foster.'

Gambit still looked baffled. 'Who on earth is J. B. Foster?'

'Mr and Mrs Foster's little boy?' Purdey suggested brightly. Both Steed and Gambit bestowed scathing looks upon her.

'J. B. Foster,' Steed announced, 'is the governor of the prison where Frank Goff served his time. There was no official sanction for Goff to be released one day early. Therefore, J. B. Foster took it upon himself to arrange Goff's unexpected parole. J. B. Foster is known to back the horses rather heavily. Yesterday, he settled up a long-standing debt with his bookmaker, involved several zeros. It would seem logical to assume, therefore, that our Mr Foster was got at.'

'And you want us to find out why, and by whom?' Gambit asked.

'Right,' Steed said. 'The sooner the better.'

'We'll get over there right away,' Gambit said, accepting the written address Steed handed him. Followed closely by Purdey, he moved towards the door then stopped, turning back.

'Steed . . . if we should come up against any trouble . . . from your personal experience of the cybernuats . . .'

'Yes?' Steed said in an even voice.

'Well . . . do they have any weak points?' Gambit asked hopefully.

'Only one,' Steed replied with a thin smile curling his lips. 'A cybernaut has absolutely no sense of humour.'

CHAPTER TWELVE

Kane's grinning mask trembled slightly as he spoke. 'Ah, the good Professor is coming back to us, Malov. Go and prepare him a good stiff drink. I think he might need it.'

Kane bent over in his chair as Mason began to stir. He groaned painfully as his eyes flickered open. As consciousness returned, he became aware that he was lying on a bare floor. He sat up, shaking his aching head.

'Where am I? What happened?' He glanced up, to see the obscene mask regarding him stonily. The sight reminded him for a moment of the steel features of the cybernaut, and the horror of that memory stirred him into instinctive reaction. Mason recoiled in terror, his fingers scrabbling against the floor as they sought purchase to push his weak body away from the grinning abomination.

'Relax, Professor Mason. I wish you no harm,' Kane whispered softly.

Mason stared into the mask, his eyes fixing upon those of Kane beneath the false face. A degree of control returned as Mason realised that he appeared to be facing a human being, at least. He sat upright, starting to clamber to his feet as Malov returned with a tumbler filled with Scotch.

'Drink, Professor?' Malov enquired politely.

'I don't drink,' Mason muttered.

'Oh, I think you should,' Kane suggested. 'I really think you may need it. I sincerely regret that my . . . assistant . . . had to be so rough with you. He is very clumsy you see . . . not at all delicate, you might say.'

Mason snatched the glass from Malov's hand, draining it in a couple of gulps. 'What was that . . . thing?' he said in a hoarse voice.

Kane chuckled, fingering the control console. 'Ah, I thought you would be fascinated,' he said.

Under his guidance, the cybernaut lumbered across the room into Mason's view, becoming immobile as Kane flicked off the main control switch.

Mason stared at it with horror, remembering its terrible strength. Finally, professional curiosity rose in him, swamping his fear. He moved a few steps towards the cybernaut, staring at it cautiously.

'You recognise it?' Kane asked.

Mason nodded thoughtfully. 'A cybernuat,' he murmured. 'I had heard of them of course . . . but I have never seen one before. Professor Dormeuil's brainchild.'

'Indeed,' Kane exclaimed delightedly. 'I am so glad to meet you, Professor Mason. So glad that you are the man I thought you would be . . . someone who understands these things. There are too many fools in the world . . . don't you agree?'

Mason regarded him piercingly for a few seconds. The gleam in those eyes behind the mask told him something. 'Fools . . . and madmen,' he replied meaningfully.

If the barb struck home, Kane did not let it show. He continued in a calm, level voice. 'I show respect for you,

Professor. I would deem it a courtesy if you would return that honour. Another drink before we get down to business?'

Mason regarded him suspiciously. 'Business? What business?'

'You mentioned Professor Dormeuil,' Kane reminded him. 'Alas, that brilliant man is long dead. But you are alive, Professor Mason ... perhaps the one man who could progress his work further, open up a whole new chapter in the story of cybernetics.' Kane noticed the flicker of surprise which showed in Mason's eyes, and chuckled. 'Oh yes, I know about your work, Professor Mason. Your research has been a closely guarded Government secret ... but I am a man who makes secrets my own private stock in trade. I know all about you, Professor Mason ... believe me.'

Mason set his lips in a firm line. 'You'll get nothing out of me,' he hissed with determination.

Kane chuckled. 'Oh, but I will, Professor. I shall get your help. With your expert advice, we shall achieve my purpose.'

'Never,' Mason said flatly. 'Even if you torture me.'

Kane clucked his tongue against his teeth reprovingly. 'Ah, you have such crude thoughts, my dear Mason. Torture is such a clumsy, ugly word. I work in much more subtle ways, I assure you.'

'Never,' Mason repeated. 'I am a patriot. I would rather die than betray my country.'

There was a brief silence, then Kane began to laugh softly. 'Ah, I see you have misunderstood me, Professor Mason. You think I am a spy ... an agent, in the pay of some foreign power. Let me clear up that misunderstan-

ding at once. You are here in a purely private and personal capacity . . . to aid me, as an individual. It will be a strictly business arrangement.'

'To do what?' Mason questioned.

Kane reached out, slapping the back of his hand against the steel chest of the cybernaut with a metallic clang. 'I want you to construct another one of these,' Kane said. 'A newer, better cybernaut . . . built to my exact specifications.' Kane produced a sheaf of papers from the pocket on the side of his wheelchair. 'Here are those specifications, Professor Mason. You are strongly urged to read them carefully.'

Mason took the papers gingerly, scanning them quickly. His eyes opened wide with incredulity as he digested the basic ideas contained in Kane's plans. 'God, man . . . you can't be serious,' he croaked in a shocked voice.

'Oh, I am perfectly serious,' Kane assured him.

Mason threw the plans down on to Kane's chair. 'It's utterly unthinkable, what you are suggesting,' he said. There was a strong hint of revulsion in his voice.

It had no effect on Felix Kane. 'But not impossible . . . eh, Professor?' When no answer came, Kane spoke again: 'You must realise that I would not have gone to all this trouble to bring you here if I was not quite sure I could persuade you to help me,' he pointed out. 'And I *can* persuade you, Professor . . . in one of two ways. Firstly, you have but to name your price. I should prefer that first option, since it would make you my paid and therefore trusted colleague.'

'And the second method?'

Kane snapped his fingers. 'Malov, bring your notebook . . . read to our esteemed guest.'

Malov stepped over, holding open a small black notebook. Clearing his throat, he began to recite. 'The girl leaves school at 4.15 precisely, every weekday evening except Tuesdays, when she has violin practise. She walks for some 120 yards across an open courtyard, turns left into a quiet side street and continues down it for a further fifty yards. At the corner, she takes a short cut across a large patch of open common land . . . invariably deserted at that time of the evening . . . and walks the final quarter of a mile to the house along a country lane flanked by high hedges on either side.' He turned to Kane. 'Need I go on, sir?'

'I doubt it,' Kane muttered. 'I think Professor Mason is in the picture by now . . . aren't you, Professor?'

Mason choked back the lump which had risen in his throat. 'My daughter,' he managed to whisper.

'Precisely so,' Kane said, with a triumphant edge to his voice. 'Your beloved daughter . . . soon to reach her fifteenth birthday. It would be a terrible pity if she were not to see that day, Professor Mason . . . if some tragic accident should befall her one evening in those quiet country lanes, on that deserted common.'

'You swine.' Mason's voice trembled as he spat out the insult. 'You would sink that low?'

Kane spoke in a calm, menacingly quiet voice. 'Please believe me . . . I would do anything . . . I repeat, anything . . . to fulfil my desire.'

The distraught scientist could only shake his head in bewilderment and grief. 'Why . . . for God's sake why?'

'I will show you why,' Kane said suddenly, in a snake-like hiss. His hand rose towards the bland plastic mask covering his real features. 'I hope you have a strong

stomach, Professor.' As he spoke, Kane whipped off the mask, exposing what was underneath to Mason's gaze.

The man paled suddenly, his mouth twisting into a grimace of appalled disgust. A shudder rippled through his body.

Kane slipped the mask back into place. 'Now you know why,' he said quietly. He waved his hand at the blow-up photos of Steed, Gambit and Purdey. 'Those three people did that to me . . . and as long as there is a flicker of life in this ruined body of mine . . . I swear I will make them suffer for it.'

Mason fought to control himself. Finally, he spoke in a whisper. 'If I agree to help you . . . you will let me go, drop this threat to my daughter?'

'Of course,' Kane agreed. 'That must be clearly understood.'

'All right,' Mason agreed grimly, accepting the inevitable. 'But I will need special tools, equipment . . . rare and costly materials.'

'Name them . . . and they shall be obtained for you,' Kane said. 'All you need to tell me is where the things you need can be found. I shall do the rest.'

'Most of the stuff I require can only be obtained from my old research wing at Purlington M.o.D. Establishment. They are Government owned . . . and guarded. A top-secret establishment . . . how could you possibly get in there and remove vital equipment?'

Kane's voice took on a mocking tone. 'You doubt my ability to penetrate a few puny defences? After what happened to you yourself only hours ago?'

Mason turned, slowly, to regard the cybernaut. 'No . . . of course . . . I had forgotten for the moment,' he said in a chastened voice.

'Ah, to forget is an unforgivable mistake,' Kane chided him. 'As is any stupid oversight.' He whirled on Malov. 'Which reminds me, Malov . . . we have left a loose end behind us, and that is an equally unforgivable mistake. We must cover all our traces, Malov.'

'I don't understand,' Malov muttered. 'What loose end have we left?'

'Foster,' Kane responded. 'We must silence him.'

'But there's hardly any link,' Malov protested.

Kane looked up at the photos surrounding him. 'We are dealing with three extraordinary people,' he said quietly. 'Three brilliant minds. If there is any link at all . . . they will find it.' He pressed the black button on the cybernaut's control panel. 'They must *not* find it,' he said firmly, as the steel figure hummed into life.

Mason threw himself back against the nearest wall as the deadly robot began to move towards him, but oblivious of him, the machine carried on past and disappeared out through the door on yet another mission of murder.

'Now, Professor, let us get down to the work of preparation,' Kane said, turning back to Mason. 'I am sure you can find most of the parts you require right here in this house.'

Mason regarded him without comprehension.

'A touch of cannibalism,' Kane said by way of explanation. He nodded to one of the other cybernauts, chuckling. 'Or should I say . . . transplant surgery?' He wheeled over to the cybernaut, stroking its shiny body lovingly.

'I'm sure the late Professor Dormeuil used only the finest materials, and put them together with loving care. Made to last for years, eh, Professor Mason?'

Mason nodded. 'Yes, it's true,' he conceded. 'I could modify many of the basic parts to suit your requirements.'

'Then do it, Professor,' Kane said bluntly. 'Start immediately. I do not wish to waste a precious second.'

Mason approached the immobile cybernaut cautiously, hardly daring to touch it.

Kane laughed, seeing his fear. 'I assure you it is quite inert ... quite safe.' He fingered the control console. 'Until I choose to make it otherwise,' he added, as a threat.

It struck home. Gritting his teeth, Mason bent down and began checking the robot's metal joints.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Gambit brought the car to a halt opposite a large, grey apartment building. 'This must be the place,' he muttered, checking the address which Steed had given him.

Purdey looked at the gloomy, squat building and shuddered. 'What a terrible place to live,' she said with distaste. 'It looks like a prison.'

'Home from home,' Gambit observed. 'Maybe our Mr Foster likes it that way.'

Purdey clutched at his arm suddenly, cutting him off. 'Mike . . . look, over there,' she cried in alarm.

Gambit followed her pointing finger. Across the road, a huge, bulky figure stumbled briefly into the pool of yellow light cast by a street lamp, then disappeared into the shadows once again. Straining his eyes into the darkness, Gambit sensed that the black shape had turned into the entrance of their own rendezvous.

'Didn't you see?' Purdey queried urgently, as Gambit turned back to confront her looking quite calm.

Gambit shrugged casually. 'I saw a big man walk under the street light, sure,' he agreed. 'Nothing particularly sinister about that, is there?'

'Very big,' Purdey said. 'But there was something else.'

'Else?' Gambit could not understand what he could possibly have missed.

Purdey's face was drawn tight as she spoke again, deliberately forcing her voice to stay calm. She trembled slightly. 'Just for a second, Mike . . . as he entered the light . . . I swear I saw his face shining.'

'Shining?' He was still not quite with her.

'Glinting . . . reflecting the light,' Purdey went on, the words tumbling over each other. 'It was just as if his face was made of polished steel.'

The penny dropped. Gambit was out of the car in a flash. 'Come on,' he screamed, breaking across the darkened street at a run and trusting Purdey to follow him at her own pace. He streaked into the building, heading for the elevator. As he reached it, the indicator showed that it was just stopping on the fourth floor.

J. B. Foster lived on the fourth floor. The coincidence was too much to ignore. As Purdey ran up behind him,

Gambit turned quickly, his eyes seeking out the stairway.

'Let's go,' Gambit shouted, finding the flight of bare concrete steps which wound around the central lift shaft all the way up the block. He bounded towards them, leaping up two at a time, with Purdey close on his heels.

They had just passed the third floor level when the sound of cracking, splintering wood came to their ears. It was quickly followed by a loud, terrified scream ... then by a whip-like crack, and then silence.

Gambit stopped dead, clutching the metal hand-rail of the staircase. He turned to Purdey. 'I think we're too late,' he muttered thickly. He turned back, beginning to creep forwards again, around the turn on to the fourth floor.

A few yards along the landing, one of the apartment doors lay in shattered pieces, smashed from its hinges. Gambit didn't need to look at the number above the empty portal to know what number it was. He waved Purdey to a stop behind him. 'Stay there,' he hissed quietly. 'I'm going in to take a look.'

'Be careful, Mike,' Purdey whispered back as he began to creep forwards, his whole body crouched into a fighting stance.

Gambit shouldered along the wall to the shattered doorway, and eased himself round until he could see into the apartment. The place was a shambles ... smashed furniture strewing the floor. In the centre of the wreckage stood the massive bulk of the cybernault, its back turned towards Gambit. In its powerful arms lay the limp body of Foster, his head lolling at an awkward, lifeless angle from his shattered neck.

Even as Gambit regarded the cybernaut silently, it

began to move, stepping across the room towards the windows. Stopping again, it jerked its steel arms quickly, sending Foster's body crashing through the glass to plummet four stories to the ground outside.

Its work completed, the machine began to turn towards the door again. Gambit ducked quickly back out of sight, his mind racing. There must be some way to disable the thing, or inflict mechanical damage upon it. Reaching into his jacket, he withdrew his gun from its shoulder holster, slipping off the safety catch and checking it quickly. He dropped back three or four paces, giving himself a bit of leeway.

The black-coated figure of the cybernaut lumbered out through the smashed doorway and stopped. Gambit shuddered involuntarily as the head slowly pivoted in a full circle, scanning its surroundings. This completed, the cybernaut's head turned again so that its camera eyes were firmly trained upon the one sight the 360 degree scan had revealed to its controller. Mike Gambit!

As the machine began to move towards him, Gambit flexed at the knees and brought the gun up carefully in a two-handed hold. He squinted along the sights, taking precise aim upon the centre of the metal forehead. It seemed logical to seek weak spots in human terms, as the machine was designed to emulate a man. He squeezed off two experimental shots. Both slugs ricocheted harmlessly off the smooth steel with a shrill whine.

Staying calm, Gambit dropped back two more steps and tried again, this time taking aim at the joint where the head fitted on to the body ... the human equivalent of the throat. Two more shots slammed into the enveloping folds of the black woollen scarf with absolutely

no effect. Already resigning himself to the knowledge that no hand-gun could stop the creature, Gambit emptied his clip at specific targets ... the knees, elbows and chest of the metallic monster. Nothing stopped its slow, relentless movement towards him.

'Give up, Mike ... run,' Purdey screamed from behind him. 'We can't fight that thing.'

He answered her without taking his eyes off the advancing cybernaut. 'We can damn well try.' Slipping his useless gun back into its holster, he dropped to a fighting crouch, his body perfectly balanced upon the balls of his feet. He held out his hands in front of him, making slow, circular movements in the air.

The machine paused momentarily, its camera eyes regarding the dancing human figure dispassionately. Then, as if it had somehow decided that this lesser creature should be eradicated from the face of the earth, it sliced out with its arm towards Gambit's head. He dropped to his knee a bare fraction of a second before the steel arm swished over him, with the whip-like sound Gambit had already learned to fear. Gambit sprang to his feet again as the machine tottered slightly, off balance. Throwing himself inside the broad compass of its massive arms, he slammed the side of his hand against the cybernaut's head, wincing with pain as mere flesh and bone crunched against solid steel.

Gambit jumped back as the cybernaut drew back for another scything blow. Steel fingers flashed across on a line with his belly, just catching the material of his shirt. Another couple of inches, and he would have been disembowelled as neatly as a pig's carcass on a slaughter-house table.

Nursing his bruised fist, Gambit circled the machine warily, already relieved to find that his sheer speed and fast reactions could keep him out of the cybernaut's destruction range. Fighting back was another story indeed! It seemed impossible, as Purdey had already tried to point out.

Desperate, Gambit tried another idea. He sprang in from the side, wrapping both arms around the cybernaut's metal wrist. Still thinking in terms of human anatomy, he attempted a simple throw. The sheer bulk of the metal monster defeated him. Quickly, Gambit modified his plan, trying to spin the machine round, suspecting that its weight would create something of a balance problem. It was no use. Apart from his skill in the science of cybernetics, the late Professor Dormeuil had been no dullard in the simpler science of dynamics. The cybernaut's massive body was perfectly designed to maintain its equilibrium under intense strain.

As Gambit still clutched the machine's arm hopefully, it swung upwards and round, lifting him bodily off his feet and hurling him towards the corridor wall. Gambit slammed backwards into the solid concrete, badly winded. As he started to scramble to his feet, the machine lumbered towards him, one leg drawing back to deliver a death-dealing lick into his ribcage.

Gambit dived between the metal legs as the cybernaut's foot crashed into the wall with a resounding clang. He was already on his feet when the machine turned to face him again.

Purdey called from behind him. 'Mike ... Party trick number nine. It could work.'

He risked a quick glance over his shoulder as the

cybernaut lumbered towards him. Purdey was right ... the old trick might well work. He turned back to face the machine, shouting his agreement. 'OK ... we'll try it.' He fell back, enticing the cybernaut to follow him.

Purdey gasped in astonishment and admiration as the metal face loomed nearer to her. Imprinted clearly on the shiny steel head was a shallow indentation, where Gambit's karate blow had found its mark. 'My God, Mike ... you dented it ... you actually dented it,' she called out.

Despite the gravity of their situation, Gambit managed a faint laugh and a retort. 'Smashing every bone in my hand at the same time,' he pointed out. 'Are you ready?'

Purdey moved into position. 'Ready when you are,' she called out.

Gambit flexed himself, facing the machine squarely. He stayed in close enough for the machine to take another sweep at him, ducking down below the whipping steel arm just in time. Out of the corner of his eyes, he noted the position of the stair-well, and the half-turn landing. As the cybernaut moved in for another attack, Gambit dropped to his hands and knees, pressing his side up against the sturdy metal knees. 'Now,' he screamed out to Purdey.

She reacted immediately. From her position five yards away, she broke into a run, ending it in a flying leap and a double-foot drop-kick. Her dainty feet landed square in the centre of the machine's steel chest with all her weight and impetus behind them. The heavy machine staggered back from the impact, just as Gambit swung his body hard into the hinged joint behind the cybernaut's knees. Thrown out of balance, the cybernaut began to topple

backwards. Gambit slithered out from behind it hastily, before he was crushed like a bug beneath the machine's prodigious weight. Leaping to his feet, he was just in time to see the cybernaut teeter backwards to the very lip of the top stair and begin to fall.

It plummeted backwards, metal arms waving wildly. With resounding clashes of tormented metal, it bounced down the flight of solid concrete steps, finally coming to rest in a twisted heap at the bottom.

Gambit and Purdey stood, breathlessly, at the top of the stairway, gazing down. Even as they looked, the mighty frame of the cybernaut shuddered, and began to move again. It sat half-upright, and looked ominously as though it were about to regain its feet and come back up the stairs after them.

The movement ceased abruptly. There was a burst of electrical activity somewhere in the machine's chest. A small shower of sparks and a plume of oily black smoke issued from its TV camera eyes. Then, with a convulsive judder, the cybernaut fell backwards again, metal clanging against concrete. The shining head lolled sideways, detaching itself from the frame. It rolled a few inches across the floor before coming to rest, its inactive mechanical eyes pointed up the stairway in a mute accusation.

Gambit and Purdey walked down the stairs slowly, warily, hardly daring to believe that they had destroyed their terrible foe. Gingerly, Purdy prodded out at the immobile body with one foot. There was no sign of movement. The cybernaut looked well and truly lifeless.

Purdey looked up, a gleam in her beautiful eyes. 'You did it, Mike ... you destroyed the thing,' she exclaimed

with pride. 'So they *can* be beaten ... they're not invulnerable.'

Gambit nodded, a little dubious even now. 'Sure' he agreed sceptically. 'Provided of course that you always have a lot of luck on your side and a flight of concrete steps handy at the time. You must remind me to order a portable set to carry around in my pocket.'

Purdey didn't find the attempt at sarcasm very amusing. She glanced back down at the fallen cybernaut. Even dead and useless as it was, the robot still bore an air of menace. 'I suppose we'd better go and telephone Steed,' she said after a while. 'He'll want the boffins to go over this little box of tricks with a fine toothcomb.'

Kane cursed under his breath as the small TV monitor screen on the control panel fizzled into a random pattern of zig-zag lines, then went completely blank. Under the smiling mask he wore, his eyes flashed in anger.

The moment of annoyance passed. Kane whirled in his mechanical chair to face the one remaining cybernaut standing motionless against the wall. 'It is of little consequence,' he muttered to the machine, addressing it as though it were human. 'Your colleague served his purpose well. He was expendable. I still have you to assist me.' Turning away from the cybernaut, he glanced across at Mason, who was stripping the third robot down systematically. 'And, of course, I have the good Professor to help me as well.'

He turned his chair, staring at the photographs. 'You really think you have me beaten?' he questioned Gambit's picture. 'Poor fool ... I haven't even started yet.'

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Steed balanced the heavy steel head of the cybernaut in the upturned palm of his hand, raising it to his own eye level. He contemplated it thoughtfully for a few seconds before a faint twinkle came into his eyes. 'Alas, poor Yoric,' he muttered aloud, replacing the robot head on a nearby table.

Gambit, glowering at him, did not appreciate the joke. 'Alas, poor Gambit,' he countered, displaying his bruised and lacerated fist for all to see.

Purdey entered the room at that second, bearing a large bowl filled to the brim with water and ice cubes. 'We'll soon do something about that,' she said brightly. Placing the ice-water on the table, she grasped Gambit's injured hand as gently as she could and plunged it into the bowl. He let out a thin squeal of agony. 'Purdey ... when did you learn about nursing?'

'About five minutes ago.' With her free hand, she held aloft a small pamphlet, clearly marked 'First Aid For Beginners'.

Gambit groaned ... not only from the pain in his damaged hand. 'Are you sure you know what you're doing?'

Purdey lifted his hand out of the cold water, placing her lips briefly against it. 'Poor, clever little fist,' she cooed, by way of an answer.

It didn't quite satisfy the fist's owner. 'Well?' he demanded, petulantly.

Purdey smiled sweetly. 'You let me handle this,' she said quietly. 'I'm not promising that you'll ever play the concert piano again, but there's one thing I *do* promise you . . . by this time tomorrow . . .'

'It will be better?' Gambit broke in, hopefully.

'It will probably feel twice as painful,' Purdey finished, dunking his hand back into the water.

Gambit managed to suppress a grunt of agony. 'Thanks,' he muttered from between clenched teeth.

There was a faint knock on the door.

'Come,' Steed called out.

The door opened a fraction. Round it came the point of an umbrella, with a clean white handkerchief tied to its end. It waved up and down a couple of times. Finally, Tom Fitzroy's voice called out softly. 'Safe to come in?'

Steed strode across to the door, yanking it open to reveal Fitzroy's sheepish face. 'Not taking any chances with those finely-honed reflexes of yours,' the man muttered apologetically. He stepped into the room warily, crossing to the sofa and sitting himself down.

'Well?' Steed demanded. 'Get anything?'

Fitzroy nodded. 'You're not going to like it,' he warned.

'Try me.' Steed wasn't in the mood for playing guessing games.

Fitzroy looked up at him with a strange expression on his face. 'We gave the torso of that thing the utmost scrutiny,' he announced. 'And we came up with just one clear thumbprint.'

'Identified?' Steed asked.

Fitzroy nodded. 'Indeed,' he said. 'We have a very positive ID.'

Steed looked impressed. 'That was quick. Unusual for Scotland Yard to be so prompt.'

Fitzroy coughed gently. 'We didn't have to go to Scotland Yard,' he muttered. 'We identified the print from our own files . . . at the Department.'

'Who?' Steed asked, his face grim. He despised traitors.

Fitzroy sucked at his lip nervously. 'I think you'd better put your hat on first . . . so you can hold on to it when I tell you.'

Steed fidgeted irritably. 'Come on, Tom. Stop playing silly games.'

'All right.' Fitzroy shrugged. 'It was Kane . . . Felix Kane.'

There was a stunned silence. Finally Steed and Purdey hissed in unison. 'It's impossible.'

Fitzroy shook his head. 'Obviously not. Improbable maybe . . . but not impossible. The print was really clear . . . there's absolutely no room for error.'

Steed sank into the sofa, utterly deflated. 'No-one could have survived that crash,' he murmured, as if trying to convince himself.

'Kane obviously did,' Fitzroy responded. 'Or at least . . . part of him.'

Steed's eyebrow lifted quizzically.

'There were other prints,' Fitzroy went on in explanation. 'Too smudgy to be of much use in positive identification, but almost certainly Kane's nevertheless. However, all the prints were of the right hand only.

There was absolutely no sign whatsoever of any left-handed prints. Which would suggest strongly that Kane lost at least his left hand in the accident.'

Steed mused upon the point for a while, finally nodding to himself. 'It all fits,' he admitted. 'Kane must have learned about the hidden cybernauts during his investigation and kept it to himself. If he's crippled in some way, that would explain why he needed them to do his dirty work for him. Was there anything else?'

'Only that we know for sure this cybernaut was the one used to abduct Professor Mason,' Fitzroy answered. 'Traces of grit taken from its toe hinges exactly match the gravel of Mason's drive. Other than that, no clues at all.'

'Do you suppose this was the only one?' asked Gambit. He didn't fancy the thought of taking on another metal foe in the immediate future.

Fitzroy shrugged. 'We have no way of knowing,' he said. 'Personally, I very much doubt it. Old Dormeuil was a wily old bird. If he was going to do anything at all, he would do it thoroughly. It's my guess he would have left at least half a dozen of his creations behind him.'

Gambit sighed. 'And I've only got one hand left,' he observed unhappily.

'Like Kane,' Purdey put in, trying to cheer him up. It didn't work.

'Why Mason?' Gambit muttered aloud. 'That part doesn't quite make sense. If Kane has up to six cybernauts at his control . . . then why did he need Professor Mason? He obviously had the things working all right . . . so what would he need another cybernetics expert for?'

Steed looked at him. 'That's been puzzling me too,'

he admitted. 'I suspect we may find an answer to that problem when we discover exactly what Mason was working on.'

'Which will be when?' Purdey asked.

'Tomorrow,' Steed vowed. 'By hook or by crook, I shall find out the answer to that tomorrow morning.' He paused to flash Fitzroy a wickedly accusing look. 'One way or another,' he finished, with heavy irony.

Fitzroy looked suitably abject. 'I've done all I can Steed,' he protested. 'The wheels are in motion, I promise you.'

Steed gave up. It was quite probable that Fitzroy really didn't know what Mason had been involved in, he reflected. Had he done so, Steed was convinced his colleague would have found some way to cut through the red tape by now.

Fitzroy climbed to his feet. 'I'd better be going then. You'll let me know . . . if you learn anything?'

'Of course, Tom. I wouldn't dream of leaving you in the dark about anything,' Steed said to him as he headed for the door.

The heavy sarcasm was utterly wasted. Fitzroy merely smiled uncertainly, and left.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Steed drove through the sentry-guarded gates of the Purlington Research Establishment as the armed guard switched off the electrified gates and opened the heavy metal portcullis. He drove to a second set of guards and climbed out of the car, flourishing his security pass. The guard looked at it carefully, nodded with satisfaction and escorted him across the car park to the main building. 'In there.'

'Thanks.' Steed touched his fingers to the rim of his bowler, walked into the building and sat down to wait. A few minutes passed.

'Mister Steed?' said a soft voice.

Steed looked up . . . into the attractive face of a white-coated woman. 'Yes indeed,' he said, smiling. 'I'm waiting for Doctor Marlow.'

'I am Dr Marlow,' the woman said, evenly.

Steed maintained a poker face, not letting the slight surprise register in his eyes. He had not expected a woman. He regarded her more closely. She was a most handsome woman, he decided. Tall, brunette, in her late thirties, Doctor Marlow looked good despite the clinical appearance of her laboratory uniform. Steed smiled inwardly. It would help, he decided. He was honest enough with himself to accept, without false modesty, that he

had a great ability to charm women. With that as an ace up his sleeve, he might well be able to elicit more information from her than from a male colleague. Steed switched on his full charm like an electric torch. 'Doctor Marlow ... so pleased to meet you.' he bowed slightly, raising his bowler.

She seemed unimpressed. 'Your pass please, Mr Steed,' she said in a toneless voice.

'Of course.' Beaming, Steed presented his identity papers.

The faintest trace of admiration showed on Marlow's face as she scanned them. She was impressed. 'Grade Six security pass, Mr Steed.' she murmured, returning it. 'You're a very important man.'

He smiled modestly. 'We all do our little bit.'

'Please follow me.' Marlow turned briskly on her heels, leading the way through a maze of faceless corridors. Finally, she turned in to a large, empty office, gesturing him to a chair bedside her desk.

Steed sat down, waiting for her to make the first move.

'It really is quite unusual, granting you an interview without any details of what you want,' she complained gently. 'We take things very seriously here at Purlington. Our work is very serious in itself.'

Steed allowed himself a wry smile. 'Well, yes ... I can imagine that thinking up new ways to kill people isn't exactly a barrel of laughs.'

Marlow started to glower at him, then the look dissolved into a half smile. Something passed between them ... a tacit understanding of their respective roles within the profession which enmeshed them both. 'What can I do for you, Mr Steed?'

'Mason,' Steed said bluntly. 'I need to know what he was working on.'

The woman looked shocked. 'You must realise, surely, that I cannot possibly release that information?'

Steed sighed, deciding to put all his cards on the table. 'You worked for nearly three years alongside Professor Mason. Does his life mean anything to you at all?'

Doctor Marlow's eyes misted over for just a fraction of a second, but it was enough to tell Steed that he had quite accidentally struck a sensitive nerve. Quite apart from professional respect, Doctor Elaine Marlow had another, less detached emotional tie with the man. Even so, she was still unsure. Her attractive green eyes shifted uncertainly. 'I'm not sure there's much I can tell you . . . at least, not without written permission.'

Steed nodded. 'Right at this moment, Doctor Marlow, some fifteen little clerks are busy at the Home Office, signing and countersigning the dozen triplicate forms which will enable you to pass on this information.' He paused, smiling. 'We cannot afford to wait that long . . . if we are to save Professor Mason's life. If it helps, I might also tell you that I believe I am distantly related to a clam.'

It was the joke which finally did it. Marlow took a breath, and began to speak. 'Encephalic acceleration,' she murmured. 'He was perfecting a step-up transformer.'

Steed was no boffin, but the words made the beginnings of sense. 'A machine to amplify brain waves . . . thought impulses,' he said, with a certain awe.

Marlow nodded, further impressed by his grasp of the subject. 'A fully portable device which can step up the tiny electro-chemical discharge of brain waves into

a fully operational mechanical impulse,' she confirmed.

Steed sat back in his chair, contemplating the implications. 'Mechanical control by pure thought,' he breathed. 'How far did he get?'

Steed didn't really want to hear what Marlow had to say next, but he braced himself for it anyway. Her face was extremely serious. 'He got all the way,' she said quietly. 'The first accelerator was built six months ago . . . and functioned perfectly.'

Steed phrased his next question carefully. 'This device . . . could it be applied to any kind of machine?'

Marlow nodded. 'Oh yes . . . any form of mechanical device powered by electrical current,' she confirmed. 'A simple headset . . . or even two electrodes taped to the temples . . . would allow anyone to fully control any given electrical appliance by just thinking the right commands.'

Steed stood up. 'Perhaps you'd be so good as to show me round Professor Mason's old laboratory.'

Marlow shrugged, standing up to join him. 'I don't see why not. I've already passed on restricted information. It's a question of sheep and lambs, at this point.'

She led the way to the door and down another set of corridors. Pausing before a double set of plain white doors, she turned, gazing directly into Steed's eyes. There was just one of his earlier comments which still bothered her a little. 'We don't spend all our time devising ways to kill people, you know,' she murmured. 'Only last month we came up with a cure for Tennilosis.'

'Tennilosis?'

'A particularly nasty and virulent bacteria infection,' Marlow answered proudly.

Steed smiled knowingly. 'Which you developed in the first place?'

Marlow looked embarassed. 'Well ... yes,' she admitted.

Steed saved her face by abruptly dropping the subject. 'Shall we go in?' he inquired politely, nodding towards the laboratory doors.

Doctor Marlow accepted the suggestion gratefully, placing her electronic security key against the plain mica lock. The doors slid back soundlessly.

The lab was deserted, but remnants of Professor Mason's experiments still lined the walls. A sophisticated IBM computer set-up took up all the available space on three sides of the large room. On the benches, dozens of pieces of electronic equipment lay exactly as they had been left.

'Very impressive,' Steed muttered. He moved towards one particular piece of equipment, about the size of a large trunk. 'What's this ... something special?'

Doctor Marlow smiled. 'You're a strangely discerning man, Mr Steed,' she answered. 'Yes, it is something rather special. That's the little box of tricks which made everything possible. Professor Mason called it his seducer.'

Steed's eyes did a quick double-take. Doctor Marlow flushed slightly, then went on to explain. 'Well, it's something like a computer ... but much more incisive. Hence the name,' she said awkwardly. Her green eyes twinkled roguishly. '*You* seem to be a very incisive man, Mr Steed.'

Their eyes met, flirting unashamedly. With the pink flush suffusing her cheeks, Elaine Marlow suddenly

seemed more attractive than ever. Her well-shaped body seemed to assert itself more strongly under the loose-fitting laboratory coat.

A sudden, whip-like crack drifted along the corridor. Steed reacted at once, throwing himself the few feet which separated him from Doctor Marlow and throwing his arm around her shoulders. He pushed her across the laboratory, thrusting her towards a row of tall metal cupboards. 'Quickly, get in there,' he hissed, throwing open the door.

She looked up at him in astonishment, her eyes smiling. 'My God you don't waste any time, do you Steed? I was only *flirting* with you, you know.' She allowed herself to be bundled into the cupboard, only starting to resist when Steed began to close the door on her. 'Aren't you coming in too?' she cried out, pressing her hands against the closing door. There was more than a trace of disappointment in her voice.

Steed slammed the door shut and turned the key, slipping it into his pocket. 'Be quiet,' he hissed warningly. The muffled protests on the other side of the door ceased at once. 'For the sake of your life . . . don't make a sound until you hear my voice again,' Steed said as a last warning, moving away from the cupboard as the sound of heavy footsteps echoed down the corridor towards the lab.

There was a brief burst of automatic gunfire, a scream . . . then again, that deadly swishing sound, followed by silence. The thunderous footsteps started again, getting nearer every second.

Steed stood, his eyes firmly fixed on the door. The footsteps stopped directly outside. There was a brief

pause, then the whole lab shook as something pounded against the heavy sheet steel of the security doors. They buckled a little, but held firm. Steed sucked at his bottom lip nervously, wondering if they were strong enough to withstand the cybernaut attack.

A second mighty blow answered the question for him. The doors folded in the middle like pieces of tinfoil, jumping off their hinges. As they fell, the shining steel body of the cybernaut was framed in the gap. Kane had done away with his half-hearted efforts to disguise his robot marauders. In the flesh, so to speak, they inspired a greater degree of terror.

The robot's head revolved slowly, scanning the entire lab. As the camera eyes fell upon the seducer, the body of the cybernaut moved into action, lumbering towards it.

Steed watched with bated breath as the machine headed straight for the equipment and wrapped mighty steel arms around it, lifting it as though it were no heavier than a cardboard box.

Satisfied that it had what it had come for, the cybernaut began to pivot back towards the door. It appeared not to have noticed Steed at all. Heartened by this fact, Steed moved, cautiously, away from the wall, creeping up behind the machine. Gingerly, he held out his umbrella by the tip, hooking the handle around the cybernaut's ankle. When the machine moved, Steed felt that he had a good chance of tripping it up.

The cybernaut was utterly motionless as Steed slowly straightened up, hardly daring to breathe. A long, tense moment passed. Steed had begun to think that the cybernaut had switched off, or somehow broken down.

Warily, still holding on to the umbrella, he edged around to the side of it, listening intently for sounds of mechanical activity within its huge body.

He never heard the vicious swish of the arm slicing back towards his head. The blow glanced off, deflected slightly by the dome of his metal-clad bowler, but the vibration was enough to stun him at once. Steed collapsed, senseless, to the ground, as the cybernaut began to move towards the open doorway clutching the seducer in one arm.

He came round slowly, emerging into light along a dark, swirling tunnel. There was a dull, pinkish blur dancing in front of his eyes. After a few seconds, it began to come into focus, finally resolving itself into Purdey's beautiful face. She looked worried.

Her lips moved. 'Thank God,' she whispered, as Steed shook his head groggily. 'He's coming round at last.'

Steed sat up, sucking in lungfuls of fresh air to help clear his head.

Purdey smiled at last, sensing that he was going to be all right. Gambit sank down beside her, grinning with relief. He thrust a heavily-bandaged hand under Steed's nose. 'Now you know how it feels.'

Steed smiled ruefully as he climbed to his feet. 'I learned how it felt when you couldn't even punch your way out of a paper bag,' he reminded Gambit, who looked suitably chastened.

'Yes, I forgot,' Gambit muttered. He found it hard to keep in mind that Steed had faced the deadly cybernauts

ten years previously ... and lived to tell the tale. His enormous respect for the man received another boost.

'What happened?' Steed grunted, regaining his feet and testing out his sense of balance rather warily.

Purdey framed her pretty lips into a soft pout. 'Oh, Steed ... you do disappoint me,' she complained. 'Such a terribly cliché ... what happened? I expected better things of you ... more original, even amusing, perhaps.'

'Speaking of originality,' Gambit interrupted. 'We found a slightly hysterical lady locked in a cupboard ... but since you were on the outside, we didn't think she could press charges.'

Steed smiled. 'Is she all right?'

Gambit nodded, suddenly serious. 'Only thanks to you, Steed. You doubtless saved her life.'

'And damned nearly threw away your own,' Purdey put in. She softened the criticism with a touch of humour: 'You really must stop being so gallant, Steed. We're liberated now.'

'Yes.' Steed fingered his bruised head ruefully. 'Still, Doctor Marlow was a lady well worth saving.'

'Did you get what you wanted?' Gambit asked.

Steed nodded. 'Yes and no,' he answered. Seeing Gambit and Purdey's obvious mystification, he explained: 'I got the information I was after ... but it certainly wasn't anything I wanted to hear. Mason had perfected a device for operating machines by thought control.'

Gambit whistled, realising the implications. 'A cybernaut controlled by an insane mind,' he muttered.

'Or worse,' Steed said quietly. 'I can't help thinking about what Tom Fitzroy said ... about Kane possibly being injured, or crippled.'

There was a silence as Gambit struggled to follow Steed's hinted thought-pattern. Finally, the penny dropped. His jaw dropped open. 'Good God, Steed ... you don't think ...?'

Steed regarded him moodily. 'That's exactly what I think,' he said heavily. 'It doesn't bear too much thinking about, does it?'

Purdey came between them, quivering with frustration. '*What* doesn't bear thinking about?' she demanded. 'What are you two blathering about?'

Gambit looked at her, and then up to Steed, who gently shook his head. It was better that she didn't know, for the moment. If his hunch was right, they could soon be up against the most deadly and efficient killing machine they had ever faced. For the moment, ignorance might well be a blessing.

'The state of the economy,' Steed said, turning towards the door.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

'Well, Professor Mason.' Kane nodded towards the seducer, resting against the wall where the cybernaut had placed it. 'Now you have your most complex piece of equipment. That should be everything.'

Mason did not answer. He was bent over a makeshift workbench which had been erected in Kane's living

room. On it, the third cybernaut lay dismembered, each piece laid out carefully in order.

Kane whirred towards him, angry at being ignored. 'Did you hear me, Professor Mason? I asked you if this was the final piece of equipment you need to complete your work?'

Mason looked up. 'Yes,' he muttered quietly.

'Good.' Kane wheeled his chair around the bench, looking happily at the pieces of electronic equipment. 'Have you finished making the purely mechanical modifications?'

'Of course not,' Mason said, with scorn in his voice. For a moment, he had forgotten the menace of the man, reacting only to his layman's unscientific stupidity.

'Malov!' Kane screamed in a shrill, tight voice.

His henchman was at his side in a moment. 'Yes, sir?'

'Professor Mason was rude to me, Malov' Kane whined. 'Remind him that he must not do that, Malov.'

'Yes sir.' Malov grinned wickedly, stepping up behind Mason. Drawing back a clenched fist, he slammed two vicious punches into the man's kidneys.

Mason doubled up, moaning in agony.

Malov looked at his employer. 'Enough, sir?'

Kane nodded. 'I hope so,' he said in a quieter, pacified voice. 'Was it, Professor Mason? Was that sufficient reminder that I will be treated with respect?'

'Yes.' Mason only managed to whisper the word out from between teeth tightly clenched against the pain.

'Excellent,' Kane hissed. 'Now I shall ask you again . . . are your modifications nearing completion?'

Mason turned painfully, bracing his back against the bench. 'What you have asked for is a major undertaking

in micro engineering. Incredible strength coupled with the most delicate precision. Work like that takes time ... you can't expect me to produce just what you want at the drop of a hat.'

Kane nodded understandingly. 'I realise that,' he murmured. 'But you must also understand my impatience. I am eager to set my plans into operation ... indeed, you could say that I am fired like a man possessed.'

'It will take time,' Mason repeated stubbornly.

'Not too much time, I trust?' Kane asked, with quiet menace underlying the soft words. 'You wouldn't be playing for time ... would you, Professor Mason. That would be a stupid ... and most dangerous ... game to play.'

Mason regarded him with distaste. 'Rest assured, Kane. I will help you achieve your insane ambition ... not because I want to, but because my daughter's life means everything to me. Believe me, I am as anxious for all this to be finished with as you are.'

'Good. I will give you time to prove the truth of that statement, Professor Mason. Three hours ... not a minute more.' With that, Kane whirled his wheelchair around and sped from the room.

Kane was absolutely true to his threat. On the very minute that the three hours of grace expired, he re-entered the room. Mason straightened up from the bench, making a last-minute adjustment to a wiring circuit. 'It is finished,' he said quietly.

Kane wheeled across to him eagerly. 'How pleased I am with you, Professor Mason,' he chuckled delightedly.

'How delighted that you turned out to be a man of sense. See . . . I beam upon you.'

Mason looked at his grinning false face and glanced away in disgust. Kane called Malov to his side. 'Malov . . . am I not wearing my beaming face?'

'Indeed you are sir,' Malov replied.

Kane looked back towards Mason. 'You think that this face of mine does not fully express my gratitude?' he questioned. 'Yes, it is but a mask, Professor . . . but dare to look beneath it, beyond it. Can you not see my eyes beneath this mask? Can you not see in them the gleam of true pleasure, the twinkle of anticipation?' He moved towards the photos of Steed and his companions, looking up at them longingly. 'Ah, how I have yearned for this moment . . . waited for the time when I could make them squirm, make them suffer.'

Mason ignored the man's insane ravings. He stood, quietly beside the bench until Kane returned. 'I have kept my part of the bargain,' he said coldly. 'Now keep yours. You promised me my freedom when I had done what you asked of me. I have done it. My work is over.'

'Oh no, Professor . . . not yet. I have need of you for a while yet,' Kane told him with a shake of his head. 'We have not completed our joint task yet.' Kane nodded to the bench. 'Are all the parts completely finished?'

Mason nodded. 'Just as you asked.'

'Then you must make me a whole man again . . . or rather, more than a man.' Kane wheeled over to the side of the bench, picking up a steel leg in his hand and gazing upon it lovingly. 'Malov,' he called. 'Come and help the good Professor fit my new body.'

Malov strode over, unclipping the front part of the wheelchair and taking it away. He removed the rug which covered what was left of his employer's legs. Kane handed him the steel limb eagerly, looking up at Mason. 'Show him how to fit it,' he commanded.

Mason bent to his knees, fiddling with the metal clasps he had welded to the dismembered leg of the cybernaut. Slipping it into position, he tightened the clamps and made final adjustments with a small screwdriver. Satisfied, he retrieved the second leg from the bench and began to fit that into position as well.

'Help me to my feet,' Kane squealed, as Mason tightened the last screw. 'My new feet.'

Mason looked dubious. 'They'll take time to get used to,' he warned. 'You will have forgotten your natural sense of balance ... it will take time to learn it again. The legs themsleves will be easy enough to operate. They are designed to pick up the electrical impulses from your own nerve endings ... they should respond almost as perfectly as your natural limbs would have done.'

'Time,' Kane snapped angrily. 'What do you know about time? I have waited many months for this moment ... do you think I cannot master a mere hunk of machinery?'

Calling Malov to assist him, Kane struggled to stand upon his artificial limbs. With the man's help, he stood upright, swaying dangerously for a couple of moments. 'Help me to the wall, Malov,' he hissed.

With Malov supporting him under his good arm, Kane progressed towards the nearest wall in a strange, stiff gait. Reaching it, he leaned with his back to it for support

and gazed down at the metal limbs supporting his body. Bracing himself gingerly, he lifted first one leg clear of the ground, then the other.

'Your scientific skill is to be admired, Professor,' he gloated. Becoming more bold, he pushed himself away from the wall and attempted to walk. He managed to take four tottering steps before starting to topple backwards. Malov, hovering at his side, rushed in to support him and keep him from falling.

Kane spoke in a breathless voice. 'I shall soon be master of these metal appendages,' he said firmly. 'Then I shall walk again ... like a normal man. Until then ...' His voice tailed off. Weakly, he gestured to the wheelchair. 'Take me back to that accursed thing, Malov. The Professor has more work to do.'

Malov escorted him to the chair and helped him sit down. With his one hand, Kane began to unbutton his shirt. 'The next stage, Professor Mason.'

Mason shrugged, picking up a shiny steel breastplate from the bench and carrying it across. He strapped it into position across Kane's scarred, hairless chest.

'Now the arm,' Kane hissed, almost beside himself with delirium. 'Make me whole again.' He looked down, eyes glinting madly as the shiny steel arm was connected up to the stump of his shoulder. When Mason had finished, and stepped back, Kane spoke again. 'That one extra little modification ... did you do what I asked, Professor?'

Mason nodded, his face clearly showing his repugnance. 'Yes, I did it ... damn you,' he hissed under his breath.

Kane reached to the steel claw with his human hand,

taking one of the shiny fingers between finger and thumb. Twisting it, he pulled it away ... to reveal a glinting scalpel blade in its place. Chuckling insanely in his throat, Kane manoeuvred the wheelchair across the room towards Purdey's life-sized photograph and stopped. With something of a struggle, he pushed himself upright, out of the chair. Balancing himself with his one remaining limb of flesh, he jabbed the razor-sharp point of the scalpel into the photo, just below Purdey's right eye.

Mason shivered with horror as Kane slowly drew the blade down across her cheek, slicing open the card which backed the photograph.

'Oh, excellent, excellent,' Kane crowed exultantly. 'I cannot wait to use this most useful little tool.' He flopped weakly back into his chair, replacing the false steel finger over the wicked blade.

Mason looked up at the mutilated photograph, feeling his stomach churning over and over in nausea.

Kane noticed the anguish on his face, and chuckled. 'You do not care for your creation, Professor? Like the good doctor Frankenstein, you fear you have transcended the rules of morality? You have made me much more than a man or a monster, Professor. You have made me half man, half cybernaut ... with the passionate hatred of one and the killing power of the other. A formidable combination indeed.' He slapped the steel hand against the breastplate with a loud clang. 'And with this, I am virtually bullet-proof ... indestructible.'

'Half-man, half cybernaut,' Mason repeated dully under his breath. 'And totally insane.'

Malov sprang across to him, drawing back his fist, but

Kane stopped him with a shout. 'No, Malov . . . not right now. Perhaps later I will allow you to administer another lesson in manners. Right now, I need the Professor undamaged. There is much work to be done before I can be the real master of my new body.'

Mason shook his head defiantly. 'I did what I said I would . . . I'll do no more.'

Kane chuckled evilly, uncapping the scalpel finger and waving it in the air. The keen blade glistened in the light. 'Your daughter, Professor . . . you think her face is pretty?'

Kane did not need to express the threat directly. His shoulders slumped, Mason stepped smartly across to do Kane's bidding.

Laughing, Kane taunted him even further. 'What degree of strength would you say I had now, Professor Mason? That of ten men . . . twenty . . . a hundred?' He held out his human arm. 'Come, Professor, help me to my new legs. You will teach me to walk . . . and then I will show you how to kill.'

Meekly, a broken man without hope, Mason began to walk the madman around the room.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

'Well ... do I pass muster? Merge with the crowd, so to speak?' Kane strolled across the room, fully dressed in a normal lounge suit, scarf, hat and gloves.

Malov regarded him critically. Beneath the scarf, the bland mask looked only slightly odd. At a normal, casual glance, Kane would easily pass for a completely normal man. He nodded affirmatively.

Delighted, Kane turned on the sullen Mason. 'You see, Professor? You see how my burning dedication overcame your scepticism?' To demonstrate his point, Kane walked normally around the room and flexed his metal arm and hand in a dozen normal human gestures. There was no trace of stiffness or awkwardness in his gait. In just two days, Kane had achieved a degree of harmony with his new body which was little short of a miracle. Mason had to concede that the madman had a point; only an almost fanatical devotion to his cause could have enabled him to achieve such mastery.

Satisfied that he had made his point, Kane walked across to the photographs and gazed up at them for a long time, savouring his own hate. 'This will be a momentous day for me,' he muttered, after a while.

Professor Mason made a last desperate attempt to appeal to some vestiges of sanity in the man. 'Why, Kane ... why? I've given you a new body ... a new life,

hope again. You have no need for revenge now. Can't you forget this hate?'

'Forget?' Kane questioned, mocking him. 'My dear Professor, to forget would be almost criminal. It would be an insult to my enemies . . . unworthy of them or me.'

'But these last few days . . . you have had the means to kill any one of these people . . . yet you didn't' Mason pointed out, nodding towards the photographs. 'Could it not be that some part of your mind wants to forget this terrible vendetta?'

Kane laughed openly. 'I see you misunderstand my motives, Professor. You think that I did not kill Steed when I had the opportunity out of pity?' He shook his head, still amused by the thought. 'Oh no, Professor Mason, the very opposite was true. To have killed any one of my enemies from a distance, using a machine . . . that would have given me no pleasure at all. To experience the real joy of destroying them, I must do it myself. Besides, despatching them with a cybernaut would have been too quick, too merciful. I have more sophisticated plans in mind.'

Mason gave up trying to rationalise with the man's twisted mind. He fell back into a sullen, heavy silence.

Kane interpreted it as some kind of victory. He chuckled delightedly, turning to Malov. 'You will see that the Professor is kept . . . comfortable, Malov? I cannot wait a second longer. I must go on the first of my missions. I shall start with the girl . . . Purdey. I want to save John Steed for last . . . the final pleasure.'

Malov produced the gun from his pocket, displaying it briefly. 'The Professor will continue to be an honoured guest while you are away,' he promised.

'Excellent.' Kane turned once more to Mason, loving the sensation of making the man suffer. 'I shall bring you every detail when I return,' he said gloatingly. 'Every scream, every plea for mercy ... and finally, the plea for the merciful release of death.' With this terrible threat, he turned away and strode towards the door.

Mason heard the roar of the Range Rover starting up, and fading into the distance. He directed his attention to Malov. 'How can you just stand by, knowing what he's going to do?' he demanded. 'He's going out to kill that poor girl.'

Malov smiled, showing no concern at all. 'But not all at once,' he said, evilly. 'Not right away.' He giggled briefly, watching the shudder of horror which rippled through Mason's body. 'That special finger you gave him ... like a razor,' Malov hissed, tormenting Mason even more. 'You excelled yourself with that little refinement, Professor.'

Mason felt physically sick. His throat was constricted and dry. 'For God's sake ... I need a drink,' he muttered weakly.

'Of course.' Malov was instantly friendly again. 'Scotch?'

Mason nodded. 'That'll be fine.'

Malov turned away to fix the drinks. Mason's eyes roved the room, desperately searching for some means of escape, a way of warning Steed what horror awaited Purdey. A few yards away, the abandoned control console leapt into focus, and with it, the beginnings of a plan.

He edged, gently towards it. Mason had watched Kane controlling the cybernaut several times. It looked amazingly simple. If he could just reach those controls while Malov's back was turned ...

'What? ... Drop it,' Malov's voice barked out, as he turned to see Mason fingering the control panel. Dropping the drinks to the floor, his hand flashed to his pocket, whipping out the gun. 'I said drop it,' he repeated, in a wild scream, even as Professor Mason stabbed the black button and punched out a series of pre-programming controls.

Behind Malov's back, the last cybernaut moved sluggishly into life, taking the first clumsy step forward. Malov turned, briefly, his eyes wide with terror as the huge machine moved up to him, one mighty arm raised high in the air. Wildly, Malov swung back and fired at Professor Mason. The bullet took him high in the shoulder, spinning him backwards. The control console fell from his hands ... but the pre-set commands could not be negated.

Malov let out a thin, piercing shriek as the heavy steel body crashed against him. The metal arm slashed down, its clenched fist smashing open the top of Malov's skull like a breakfast egg. He collapsed silently to the floor as the cybernaut took one more step forward, came to the end of its programmed movements, and lapsed into immobility once again.

Mason picked himself up from the floor, clutching at his wounded shoulder. Blood seeped from between his fingers, but luckily the bullet had not severed a major blood vessel. Malov had fired in panic ... and the bullet had only found a mark out of chance, rather than judgement. Counting this amongst his other blessings, Mason dragged himself towards the telephone and dialled Steed's number.

Mason fidgeted uncomfortably as the ringing tone re-

peated over and over in his ear. After what seemed an eternity, Steed answered.

'Steed ... it's Professor Mason. Your girl ... Purdey ... she's in dreadful danger. It's Kane ... he's quite mad ... he's gone to kill her ... worse than kill her. He's more than a man now Steed ... he's a superman, incredible strength, bulletproof.' Mason broke off with a grunt of pain.

Steed's anxious voice came over the telephone. 'Are you hurt?'

Mason pulled himself together with an effort. 'Don't worry about me, Steed. I'll be all right. There's no time to waste ... you have to protect that girl.'

'I'm on my way,' Steed assured him, dropping the telephone back into its cradle.

Mason slumped back with relief, praying that his warning had been in time. After a little while, he roused himself again, dragging his body across the floor to Malov's corpse. Tearing at the man's clothes, Mason finally managed to rip off a length of shirt material. He began to bandage his wound, staunching the flow of blood.

Steed picked up the telephone again mere seconds after replacing it. With quick, somewhat nervous stabs of his finger, he dialled Purdey's home number. The repetitive burr of the engaged signal came to his ears.

'Damn.' With a muttered curse, Steed slammed the receiver back into its rest, glancing at his watch. It was just after nine-fifteen in the morning. Purdey was not engaged on the telephone; Steed knew her habits only too well. At this time of the morning, she would be practising

her Yoga exercise. To preserve perfect concentration, she always took the phone off the hook.

Snatching the receiver up again, Steed called Gambit. It rang for a long time before a sleepy, and slightly disgruntled voice answered. Steed's message was brief, and to the point. 'Mike . . . it's exactly as we feared. Kane is a deadly machine . . . on his way to Purdey right now. Get there as fast as you can.'

Gambit shrugged off the last vestiges of drowsiness, the urgency of Steed's tone alerting his full concentration almost instantaneously. 'Right,' he snapped, dropping the telephone. At the run, he headed for the wardrobe, to throw on some clothes before rushing to Purdey's rescue.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Gambit slewed his car to a squealing halt outside the entrance to Purdey's flat. Springing from the car, he glanced all around him quickly. There was no sign that anything untoward had happened. The door of Purdey's flat was undamaged, and everything looked peaceful. With a great feeling of relief, Gambit realised that he had arrived in time . . . before Kane could reach his target. Relaxing a little, he looked around him a second time, taking in everything in the quiet street.

Nothing moved. It was a quiet, suburban Sunday mor-

ning. Later, perhaps, the street would burst into a flurry of car-washing and hedge-trimming activity. For the moment, people chose to remain in their beds.

Gambit's eyes narrowed as a green Range Rover turned into the street, cruising unhurriedly towards him. He leaned back against the side of his car, pretending to light a cigarette. From the corner of his eye, he watched the Range Rover pull to a halt on the opposite side of the street.

Gambit's keen eyes took in every detail of the vehicle's driver, and his quick mind was instantly alerted. There was something quite odd about the man. It was a warm, sunny morning ... yet the Range Rover's driver was heavily muffled in a thick woollen scarf, right up to his ears and nose. As casually as he could, Gambit pushed himself away from the side of his car and strolled across the road to investigate.

Kane, equally alert, saw Gambit coming, recognising him at once. He shifted in his seat, raising one steel leg over the transmission tunnel between the front seats. As Gambit neared, Kane drew back his leg, bracing his back firmly against the driver's door.

Gambit's hand slipped imperceptibly towards the single button of his jacket, undoing it. As if casually scratching his stomach, his fingers moved upwards towards his shoulder holster. He was just five feet away from the Range Rover now, and ready to draw and fire in a second, if the need arose.

The need arose ... but the chance never came! Gambit was taken completely off guard as Kane released his newly-found super-strength into a two-footed kick against the passenger door. It flew out, clear of the Range

Rover, as though its burst-proof locks and sturdy hinges had been made from rotten timber. Gambit took the full force of the flying door full in the chest, the impact throwing him back heavily. He collapsed in the road, the door crashing on top of him.

Kane swung himself out of the car, his eyes darting up and down the quiet street. There was no sign that anyone had witnessed the event. Quickly, he snatched up the broken door in his steel hand as though it were made of aluminium, and tossed it casually into the back of the Range Rover. He bent over Gambit's limp, unconscious form.

His eyes glittered beneath the mask. 'Excellent,' he gloated to himself. 'Two for the price of one.' Scooping Gambit's body up, Kane dumped him unceremoniously in the Range Rover, covering him with a blanket. 'I will deal with you after the girl,' he whispered to the unconscious man. He took one more careful look around him, then crossed the deserted street towards Purdey's basement flat. He marched purposefully towards the door.

Purdey sat on the lounge carpet, dressed only in a loose-fitting blue kimono. Her eyes were closed, her breathing shallow and regular. Relaxed, comfortable, in a perfect full Lotus, she intoned a mantra under her breath, feeling gentle vibrations of power flooding into her body.

The rattle of the doorknob shattered the perfect mood of tranquility. With a flicker of annoyance, Purdey returned her full attention to reality and uncrossed her long legs gracefully, rising to her feet. She walked slowly to the front door. 'If that's you, Mike Gambit ... come to get

your own back . . . I'll murder you,' she called out. Reaching the door, she stopped dead, her eyes riveted on the door handle, which was slowly turning a full circle.

As she watched, the lock snapped with a squeal of tortured metal. Purdey's reactions were lightning fast. Jumping forward, she threw the safety bolt and chain into position at the top of the door. The door eased open a few inches, before reaching the end of the chain. She stood back, waiting.

A mere piece of chain was no impediment to the new Kane. With one thrust, he slammed the door forward, the links of the safety chain splitting open with a faint ring. The door slammed back against the wall, revealing Kane in the portal.

He stepped into the room quickly, closing the door behind him. Purdey dropped back several paces, eyeing him warily.

From behind the inhuman mask, Kane spoke: 'Ah . . . Purdey. I don't think we ever actually met . . . but you know who I am, don't you?'

Purdey nodded, showing no fear. 'Felix Kane.'

Kane chuckled with delight. 'Ah, such a sharp, intelligent mind. Rare in one so beautiful. I can see why Steed chose you.' His voice changed to one of icy menace. 'Yes, it's good that you know who I am. Important. My pleasure in killing you would be greatly diminished if you were ignorant of my identity.' He took a couple of steps towards her.

Purdey moved back against the wall, maintaining as much distance as she could. 'Why should you wish to kill me?'

Kane laughed wickedly. 'You dare ask me that . . . one

who has suffered as I have... waiting for so many months to rise like a phoenix from his own funeral pyre?' Kane started to remove his gloves, revealing the shiny steel hand for the first time. 'You might like to know that you have the honour of being my first victim,' he told Purdey. 'I chose you first because Steed will suffer so much when he sees you... he is very fond of you, I know.'

'Sees me?' Purdey edged along the wall, anticipating a frontal attack.

Kane gurgled. 'When he sees what has ... become of you.' As he spoke, he twisted off the top of the false finger, revealing the cruel blade concealed underneath. He made a couple of criss-cross sweeps in the air.

Purdey's eyes regarded the steel blade coolly, without showing fear. Kane's own eyes glinted angrily beneath the mask. He had expected her to cringe, scream for mercy. Her attitude disappointed him, robbed him of sadistic pleasure.

Purdey sensed a temporary advantage. If she could upset him, throw him off balance, there was a chance she could use his anger and frustration as a weapon against him. Forcing a sarcastic smile, she nodded towards the steel scalpel. 'A little device for taking the tops off bottles?' she enquired. 'Or can't you drink out of bottles any more? Just the odd pint of motor oil?'

Kane glared at her. 'You sound very brave, Purdey. I wonder how you will sound when I have started work upon that exquisite face of yours?' Without a warning, he lunged towards her, his steel hand slicing out at her throat in a vicious arc.

Purdey dropped to her knees, throwing herself side-

ways along the wall. Regaining perfect balance, she manoeuvred herself behind a plushly-upholstered sofa.

Kane skirted around it slowly, still trying to demoralise her with threats. 'Have you ever considered the cruel vagaries of fate, my dear? The concert pianist who breaks his fingers ... the champion tennis player who breaks his elbow?' He paused for effect. '... Or even the beautiful ballerina ... or ex-ballerina ... whose legs are shattered beyond repair?'

Purdey dived down, pushing at the sofa with all her strength. Kane put out a single finger, stopping it from moving. In a gesture of his own strength, he swept it to one side. On its roller castors, the heavy piece of furniture flew across the room to the side wall.

Kane stopped, staring intently into Purdey's eyes. 'Just one moment more,' he hissed. 'One precious moment to enjoy you ... that lovely face. To remember you ... as you once were.'

Purdey took advantage of his pause. She threw herself sideways, brushing past Kane before he could turn. Running to the bedroom, she retrieved her automatic from beneath her pillow. Standing framed in the bedroom doorway, she emptied a full clip into Kane's metal chest.

Laughing, he stepped forwards again, the steel claw reaching out to snatch the useless gun from her grasp. Flexing his steel fingers, he crushed the gun into a shapeless mass of metal before tossing it to the ground. 'You will have to do better than that, my dear.'

Purdey ducked back into the bedroom, snatching up a casual chair. Swinging it up over her head, she hurled it towards Kane's head. With one rapid cleaving motion of

his arm, he demolished it in mid-air. Broken fragments of wood sailed harmlessly past him.

Kane was almost beside himself with joy. 'That's right ... delay me, try to fight ... try to put off that inevitable moment. You can only give me even greater heights of pleasure, my dear Purdey, for anticipation is one of the true joys of life. The longer it takes to get at you ... the more I shall enjoy it.' He stooped suddenly, with unbelievable speed, snatching up one corner of the Afghan rug which ran from the lounge into the bedroom. With a savage tug, he whipped the rug clear from the floor, sweeping Purdey's feet away from underneath her. She plunged backwards, to sprawl untidily upon her bed.

With a whoop of glee, Kane launched himself into the air. His prodigious leap took him through the doorway towards her, the gleaming scalpel held out in front of him like a lance.

Just in time, Purdey rolled her body sideways. The point of the blade sank deep into the mattress only inches from her shoulder. A split second earlier, and it would have pierced her through the heart. She did a back somersault, landing neatly on her feet on the other side of the bed. Reaching out to her dressing table, Purdey snatched up a heavy table lamp and swung it at her temporarily prostrate foe ... but once again, Kane blocked the blow with his steel arm. The lamp rebounded from the metal limb with a shuddering jar which nearly dislocated Purdey's wrist.

Kane sprang to his feet, still gloating. 'So you do intend to make a fight of it? So much the better. I am enjoying every minute.'

Purdey eased back to the wall as Kane prepared to spring over the bed. Edging along it, she felt for the comforting solidity of the antique mahogany wardrobe, and eased herself into position, standing still.

Kane cleared the bed and regarded her rigid posture. Under the mask, which betrayed nothing, his voice sounded almost disappointed. 'You've tired of the game already? You just want to wait for me to finish you off?'

There was no answer. Purdey remained perfectly still, her keen eyes looking for the tell-tale signs of impending movement.

'Then I *shall* finish it.' Kane lurched forward as he spoke, his steel arm fully extended in front of him. The wicked blade on the end of his finger flashed straight for Purdey's face.

At the last moment, she did no more than nod her head to one side. The blade buried itself deeply in the thick wood of the wardrobe. Purdey sprang into the second stage of her plan at once, throwing all her weight against Kane's frame, pushing him sideways. There was a sharp, metallic crack. Kane looked in disbelief at his steel finger, now without its little weapon. The wicked blade had snapped off cleanly, now permanently embedded in the wardrobe.

Purdey laughed softly. 'Surprised, Kane? Surgical steel . . . it's very hard, very sharp . . . but quite brittle.'

Kane snarled with rage, realising that he had been outsmarted. 'That was just a little refinement,' he spat at her. 'I don't need it.' To add emphasis to the words, he lashed out at the solid bulk of the wardrobe. In three quick blows, he had reduced it to matchwood.

Purdey stopped laughing. Her pretty face curled into a

really vicious expression. 'Now you've really made me angry,' she blazed at him. 'That was one of my favourite antiques. She ran at him, springing into a flying drop-kick. The force of the blow made Kane totter back for a couple of steps, but he kept his balance.

Purdey followed up her attack with two more impossibly high kicks, both aimed at his right shoulder. 'The right-hand thumbprint, I believe Fitzroy said,' she said from between gritted teeth. 'So let's see how the remaining human part of you is up to a little punishment, shall we?'

Kane grunted with pain as the blows struck home to vulnerable flesh. His right arm drooped limply at his side as Purdey's expertly-placed kicks numbed his muscles. For the first time, he began to give ground as the enraged girl moved in on him, circling him silently.

From outside in the street, a loud squeal of brakes diverted them both. It was quickly followed by the sound of a car door slamming, then running feet.

Steed's voice called out urgently. 'Purdey ... are you alright?'

Kane froze, his eyes flashing anger and frustration underneath the mask. 'So ... you escape me this time,' he hissed at Purdey. 'But I shall be back ... when you least expect it, when you are least prepared. Mark my words ... it isn't over yet, not by a long chalk.'

Turning from her, he jumped for the bedroom window, crashing through it in a shower of broken glass.

Purdey collapsed upon the bed with sheer relief as Steed came running into the bedroom. He looked at her quickly, his expert eye telling him that she was uninjured. His face creased into a huge smile. He glanced,

slowly, around the flat. 'Another one of your wild all-night parties?' he enquired pleasantly.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Steed's jocular mood evaporated immediately as Purdey lifted herself up from the bed and threw herself into his arms. She hugged him tightly around the neck, sobbing with relief. Steed felt the warm moistness of tears against his cheek.

He disengaged her gently, depositing her back onto the bed. Reaching into his top pocket, he extracted a pristine white handkerchief and handed it to her. Purdey accepted it gratefully, dabbing at her eyes. Now that the horror was over, she quite enjoyed the sheer indulgence of being a woman again.

Steed waited until she had fully composed herself. 'Where's Gambit?' he asked, as she pulled herself together.

Purdey flashed him a wry smile. 'Where do you think? Somewhere else. That man is never around when he's needed.' She saw the worried frown cross Steed's brow and the smile faded. 'Steed? Is Mike in trouble?'

Steed shook his head thoughtfully. 'I don't know,' he admitted. 'He certainly got here . . . I know that. His car's outside. Are you sure you haven't seen him?'

Purdey shook her head vehemently. 'Of course I'm

sure.' Genuine concern showed in her eyes. 'Steed ... what do you think has happened to him?'

The man looked grim. 'Then, somehow, Kane must have got to him first,' he muttered. He looked absolutely shattered.

'No ... wait ... that can't be true,' Purdey blurted out suddenly, remembering Kane's words. 'Kane definitely said ... I was the first. He made a special point of it ... saying that my death would make you suffer more than anything.'

A flash of hope lit Steed's face. 'He definitely said that?'

Purdey nodded. 'Yes. Surely he would have mentioned Gambit if he had already dealt with him.'

Steed sucked his teeth pensively. 'Which probably means that he's still alive,' he mused. 'But where is he?' He concentrated for a few seconds, throwing his mind into total recall. When he had arrived outside Purdey's flat ... he had seen Gambit's car ... and something else. Steed struggled to remember. He had been in such a tearing hurry to get to Purdey that little had really registered. The vague memory surfaced. 'A green Range Rover,' he muttered under his breath.

'What?' Purdey asked, but Steed was already running to her door to peer out into the street. After a quick glance, he came back, nodding. 'A green Range Rover,' he repeated out loud. 'It was parked right opposite.'

'Kane's?' Purdey queried.

Steed nodded. 'It has to be,' he said firmly. 'He would have needed some sort of a vehicle like that to transport the cybernauts from place to place ... something which could have been adapted to house a wheelchair before he got his new body.'

'And Gambit?' Purdey asked.

'Gambit must have been inside ... probably unconscious,' Steed surmised. 'Now Kane has him as a hostage.'

Purdey gasped, with a sharply indrawn breath. 'God, what will that maniac do to him?'

Steed thought carefully before delivering his answer. 'Probably nothing,' he said after a while. 'It's me Kane really wants. I think he only attacked you to get at me ... Gambit may well fall into the same category. If Gambit is still alive, I would guess Kane will keep him that way ... if only as bait to lead me where he wants me.'

'My God, Steed, I hope you're right,' Purdey breathed.

Steed's eyes widened. 'So do I,' he said, fervently.

'You didn't get the licence number of the Range Rover, I suppose?' Purdey asked hopefully.

Steed shook his head. 'It didn't seem important at the time.'

'No.' Purdey lapsed into thoughtful silence for a while. 'So we really have no way of finding out where Kane's base is?'

'That's about the size of it,' Steed agreed. 'It's up to him now to make contact with me ... and I have a strong feeling that's exactly what he will do. When he feels in a strong position, that is.'

'He'll try to lead you into a trap, of course?'

'Oh, of course,' Steed murmured. 'Felix Kane was never a man to leave things to chance. Before he turned rogue, he was a damned good agent. One of the best, in fact. The fact that he is insane now is probably quite irrelevant. His mind will still be every bit as devious as it ever was ... possibly even more so.'

'Oh.' Purdey sank back on to the bed, feeling utterly deflated. 'So there's absolutely nothing we can do except just wait?'

Steed thought for a while. Finally, he said: 'Well, perhaps there is something. Can I use your telephone?'

'Of course.' Purdey gestured to the bedroom extension. 'Or you can use the one in the lounge if it's private.'

Steed shook his head. 'No, not really. But I will use the other phone anyway . . . just out of good form. It really is quite ungentlemanly to speak to one lovely lady in the direct presence of another.'

Purdey looked up at him suspiciously, her curiosity aroused. 'Steed, who are you calling?'

'Elaine Marlow,' Steed answered, casually.

'Who?' The name meant nothing to Purdey.

'That rather attractive woman you found locked in a cupboard,' Steed volunteered.

'Oh.' Purdey looked at him, a trace of disappointment in her eyes. 'I really am quite surprised at you, Steed. How you can chat up your lady friends at a time like this . . . when Mike is in such dreadful danger.'

Steed's eyes twinkled as he headed for the telephone. 'An old adage, Purdey . . . always mix business with pleasure, whenever the opportunity presents itself.'

Steed was on the telephone for a long time. When he finally returned, there was a faint smile on his face, showing that something had given him a lot more confidence. 'Remarkable woman,' he muttered, while Purdey just gaped at him curiously. 'Such a brilliant mind in so beautiful a body. A rare combination indeed.'

'You're up to something,' Purdey challenged him. 'I know that look, John Steed. What is it?'

He looked at her with mock innocence, but there was a mysterious twinkle in his eyes. 'Me? Up to something?'

Purdey sighed with exasperation. It was absolutely no use prodding him when he was in that sort of mood. She knew from past experience. There was nothing for it but to be patient, and see what happened. 'Well, what do we do now?' she asked instead.

Steed became serious again. 'I think we'd better get back to the stud farm,' he suggested. 'If Kane is going to contact me, he'll try there first. Are you already to go?'

Purdey looked down at her torn kimono and then up into Steed's eyes with disgust. 'Do I *look* as though I'm ready to go anywhere?' she demanded sarcastically.

Steed grinned. 'Rough stuff, this yoga.'

He moved towards the door. 'I'll wait for you outside. You'd better drive Gambit's car.'

CHAPTER TWENTY

Gambit stirred, sluggishly, as consciousness returned. He struggled to sit upright, grunting with pain as his bruised ribs reminded him of his painful encounter with the flying door.

'Ah, Mr Gambit. I see you are back with us again,' Kane hissed.

Gambit shook his head to clear it, blinking until the fuzzy haze in his eyes began to resolve itself into a fully focused picture. The bland, inhuman mask of his captor gradually became clear.

Simultaneously, Gambit took in his immediate surroundings and situation. He was in the rear of the Range Rover, which was stationary. They were in open countryside. Kane was outside the vehicle, staring in at him through the open rear door.

'Now that you are conscious again, I suppose you might be foolish enough to attempt escape,' Kane murmured. 'We shall have to do something about that possibility.' He reached into the vehicle, picking up a pair of heavy steel tyre levers. Manipulating them between his human hand and his steel claw, he began to bend and twist them as though they were made of putty. Gambit watched in amazement as Kane fashioned the tyre levers into a pair of fetters. Slipping them around Gambit's ankles, he squeezed them tight, binding his ankles in a vice-like clamp. That job finished, the steel hand reached out and grasped Gambit's wrist, squeezing tightly. 'The other hand, please, Mr Gambit.'

Gambit had no choice but to comply meekly. The pressure of the steel fist told him that any attempt at resistance would mean a hand rendered virtually useless for life. That metal hand could crush the bones of his wrist like a bunch of brittle twigs. He offered his other hand. Kane picked up a length of electric flex with his human hand and bound Gambit's wrists tightly together.

Satisfied that his prey was rendered completely helpless, Kane stood back. 'That should keep you quiet,' he observed. 'Now, if you wouldn't mind moving over

Mister Gambit . . . to make room for your fellow passengers.'

When Gambit didn't move, Kane reached into the vehicle again, roughly thrusting the helpless man to one side of the Range Rover. Bending down outside the vehicle, he began to manhandle something heavy up from the ground outside. Gambit drew in a deep breath as the shining metal head of a cybernaut came into view.

Without apparent effort, Kane lifted the prodigious weight of the metal robot into the back of the vehicle and slid it into position beside Gambit's prone form. A second cybernaut soon joined the first. Kane wedged both machines formally into position, then slammed the rear door, returning to the driving seat. He chatted over his shoulder as he started up the engine. 'Some reinforcements', he informed Gambit. 'I do hate to admit it, but it does begin to appear that I rather over-estimated my new powers. A little-harsh self-truth doesn't hurt a man now and again, don't you agree, Mr Gambit?'

Gambit sneered at him. 'You're not a man, Kane. You're a circus freak . . . an abomination. The best thing you could do is get your name down for a job when they remake The Wizard of Oz.'

'You will not antagonise me,' Kane hissed coldly. 'You are not important enough to distract me from my plans. However, your friends probably attach some sort of importance to your puny body. They will, no doubt, attempt to rescue you. When they do . . . I want to be sure that I have the means to destroy them completely. This time, with the help of your sleeping travelling companions, I shall make sure of the three of you, once and for all.'

The words were intended to dismay, but instead they gave Gambit a surge of relief. So the madman had not managed to get at Purdey after all! She was safe, at least for the moment. It was a great comfort. He spoke again to Kane, this time quite seriously. 'You know better than that, Kane. You were a member of the Department yourself. It's a fixed rule that if one agent gets into trouble, he's on his own. It's strictly against the rules for a fellow agent to jeapordise himself by attempting rescue.'

The bluff failed to work. Kane chuckled softly. 'Do you really take me for such a fool, Gambit? You know . . . as I know . . . that Steed never abides by the rules. He's a law unto himself. Besides, you and Purdey are not just fellow agents. The three of you share a close bond of friendship . . . which goes above and beyond your work. Of course Steed will try to come to your assistance . . . and it will be a foolish mistake. His misplaced loyalty will sign his death warrant.'

Gambit lapsed into silence for a while. He had forgotten that Kane knew Steed so well. After a few moments of consideration, he decided to go back to insults. Kane was sufficiently deranged that it should be possible to goad him into some rash action. 'Well, you certainly talk with a lot of confidence . . . for a failure,' he said, in a cheery tone. 'For a superman, I wouldn't say you were doing too well at the moment. I certainly wouldn't give great odds against you getting the better of Steed . . . when you can't even handle a mere woman. Or is that about your mark, Kane? Beating up women?'

Gambit was talking with far more assurance than he really felt. The presence of the two cybernauts beside him was highly disconcerting, to say the least. Having faced a

single robot killer, Gambit could only hazard wild guesses as to the combined destructive powers of a matched pair.

He must have sounded convincing, however, for Kane hissed at him angrily. 'Shut up ... or you will suffer, I promise you.'

Gambit laughed sneeringly. 'Oh, you're a great one for promises, Kane. Only they don't seem to quite come off, do they?'

With a hiss of vexation, Kane brought the Range Rover to an abrupt halt. He turned in the seat, reaching out with his bunched steel fist for Gambit's head. 'You really are a most tiresome man, Gambit,' he muttered savagely. 'I can see I am going to have to silence you.' As he spoke, he cuffed Gambit lightly on the temple ... but the blow was enough to plunge him back into unconsciousness.

In silence, he continued driving.

Kane strode into the room jubilantly, calling out to his henchman. 'Malov, we have another guest ... and shall shortly be expecting even more.'

He stopped dead in his tracks as his eyes fell upon Malov's inert body, his head laying in a pool of drying blood. Kane's eyes blazed with rage under the mask, roving the room and settling on the slumped figure of Professor Mason. He walked over to him briskly, seizing the dazed man viciously and hauling him to his feet. 'So ... you have been up to some little tricks while I was away?' Kane ignored Mason's groans of pain as he shook the man like a bundle of old rags, finally throwing him to the floor again. Fresh blood began to seep from Mason's

shoulder, a lighter shade of red against the dark russet-brown of the large stain which had spread across the front of Mason's shirt. Viciously, Kane kicked out at the wounded shoulder, eliciting a scream of agony from the semi-conscious man. Kane drew back his leg for another kick, then suddenly checked himself. 'No ... I must not finish you off now, not yet,' he whispered quietly. 'You will miss too much.'

He dropped to his knees beside the Professor, shaking him gently. The man groaned dully, his eyelids flickering open to reveal dull, watery eyes. 'Can you still hear me, Professor Mason?' Kane muttered. 'Are you still able to know what is going on around you?'

The man's lips moved almost imperceptibly. 'I ... warned Steed,' Mason managed to croak in the faintest whisper. 'He'll stop you.'

With his steel fingers, Kane ripped away Mason's blood-stained shirt, observing the wound at close quarters. The Professor had already lost a great deal of blood. Without treatment, he was unlikely to live for more than an hour or so. It would be a pity, Kane reflected, to let him miss the festivities which he had already planned. He stood up, going outside to fetch clean bandages and water. Returning, he bent over Mason once again, carefully cleaning and dressing the wound. When he had finished, he forced a tumblerful of whisky between the man's pale lips, holding back his head so that the liquor dribbled down his throat. Finally, he dragged Mason against the wall, propping him up in a seated position.

The Professor's eyes seemed to have a little more life in them. He looked up at Kane wonderingly.

Kane chuckled gently. 'I see you are surprised, Pro-

fessor, that I take such pains to help you. Let me assure you, it is not out of purely altruistic motives. You are a dying man, Professor Mason . . . but I do not wish you to die too soon.'

'Why?' The single word was squeezed from between Mason's lips.

'You mentioned Steed,' Kane told him. 'I want you to see what happens to him.' He nodded across to Malov's corpse. 'You have disposed of my only other spectator. You shall have his ringside seat instead. It will be a great fight to watch, Professor . . . like a piece of ancient history brought to life again. The Roman Games . . . relived in this room. Steed and his companions will be the Christian martyrs . . . I and my cybernauts will be the gladiators. A titanic clash indeed . . . a spectacle!'

Mason forced his lips into a sneer. 'You're as mad as a hatter,' he murmured.

Kane straightened up, resisting the impulse to smash out at the wounded man. He fought to control himself, for he did not wish to be cheated of his malicious pleasure. 'Hang on to life, Professor,' Kane whispered down at Mason. 'Hang on to it preciously . . . long enough to see Steed forfeit his.' Turning away, Kane went outside to fetch in Gambit and the two cybernauts.

Gambit had regained consciousness again. Kane lifted him over his shoulder like a sack of flour, carrying him into the room and dumping him beside Mason. 'Need I warn you again to keep quiet?' he asked.

Gambit kept his lips firmly closed. He was not likely to attempt to antagonise Kane any more. At this stage of the game, he needed to remain conscious and alert if he was to stand any chance of survival at all.

Kane accepted his silence with satisfaction. 'Good,' he muttered. 'You have decided to be sensible.'

Leaving them, he turned his attention to the cybernauts, spending several minutes activating them in the way Goff had done. This done, he retrieved the control console, and began touching the controls gently.

All three machines responded perfectly. Kane breathed a small sigh of relief. For a few moments, he had feared that Mason might have sabotaged the console, rendering it inoperative. Luckily, Malov's bullet must have found its mark before he was able to do so.

Kane returned his attention to the cybernauts with renewed concentration. He despatched one of them outside, placing it out of sight around the side of the house. He faced it carefully down the drive, so that he would be able to observe anyone approaching through its camera eyes. Satisfied with this precaution, he returned inside and positioned his remaining two robots exactly where he wanted them.

Only then did he pick up the telephone and call Steed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

'Steed?'

Steed glanced quickly across at Purdey, nodding to signal that it was Kane on the telephone. He turned back, holding the receiver to his mouth. 'Felix ... how lovely

to hear from you, old chap,' he said in a cheerful voice. 'It's been such a long time.'

Kane hissed over the earpiece. 'Don't be facetious with me, Steed. I have your colleague, Gambit.'

'I am glad to hear that,' Steed replied casually. 'We did rather wonder where the fellow had got to. Behaving himself, is he?'

'All right Steed ... have your little joke,' Kane hissed. 'And when you've had enough, ask Purdey to remind you of my capabilities. Gambit will suffer the full effects of them unless you do exactly what I say.'

'All right Kane.' Steed was suddenly in deadly earnest. 'Let's all stop playing these silly games, shall we? You want me ... just me ... right?'

'Ah, I see you understand me as well as ever, Steed,' Kane replied. 'Yes, it's you I want to settle the score with. You alone.'

'Then we meet face to face,' Steed suggested. 'On the strict understanding that you let Gambit and Purdey go free.'

'Agreed,' Kane said, with a chuckle. 'It will be so nice to see you again.'

'When and where?' Steed asked, in a brisk, businesslike fashion.

'You will come here,' Kane answered. 'You will come alone ... for if you attempt to bring help, I shall know about it in good enough time to subject Gambit to a most excruciating death ... is that fully understood?'

'Understood,' Steed confirmed.

'Good.' Kane gave Steed directions, then hung up.

Steed turned to Purdey, who was just putting down the telephone extension. 'You caught all that?'

She nodded. Her pretty face formed into a worried frown. 'You don't believe him, do you Steed? I mean, you're not going to trust him ... about letting Gambit and I go free?'

Steed smiled, shaking his head. 'Of course I don't trust him for an instant,' he replied. 'I know Felix Kane too well for that ... and he knows I know. No, that was all part of the game to him ... his own, deadly little game.'

'And you're going to play it?' Purdey asked.

Steed grinned wickedly. 'But not by Queensberry rules,' he said. 'I intend to cheat a little bit.'

She cheered up at once, now that her suspicions were confirmed. Steed *did* have something up his sleeve. Encouraged, she managed a smile, and a little joke. 'You made one little mistake,' she told him.

Steed's face fell. 'Mistake?' he queried.

'Not face to face,' Purdey corrected. 'Face to mask ... if you want to be technically correct.'

'Pedant,' Steed threw at her, smiling.

She shrugged prettily. 'Sticks and stones,' she countered.

The light-hearted banter covered up the doubts and fears that they both felt ... and they both realised it. Still, it helped.

Steed crossed the room, putting on his coat. Slipping his bowler into place, he patted it with a flourish, picking up his brolly. 'Well, I suppose I'd better be off,' he said brightly, almost as if he were off out for an evening at the theatre. He moved towards the door.

Purdey watched him, chewing at her lip a little nervously. He had only got half-way across the room when the words on her lips broke. 'Steed?'

He turned, expectant, regarding her with a cool, knowing look. 'Yes, Purdey?'

'I want to come along,' she blurted out.

Steed nodded. 'Yes, I thought you might,' he admitted. 'It might not be a picnic . . . you realise that?'

'Of course. But you do need someone to look after you, Steed. Besides, Kane has faced me once and been shown lacking. My presence now might well have a psychological effect upon him.'

Steed conceded the point. 'Yes, you might well have something there,' he said thoughtfully. He paused for a while, doubts and anxieties clear upon his face. Finally, he forced a grin. 'All right . . . why not? The more the merrier,' he said.

He held out a crooked arm. Purdey ran to him, linking up. Together, they marched towards the door again. Suddenly, he stopped, checking himself. 'Ah . . . I almost forgot,' he murmured. 'I must just make another telephone call before we leave.'

'To whom?' Purdey wanted to know.

'Elaine,' Steed murmured absently, walking back to the phone. He lifted the receiver and inserted his finger into the first digit, without actually starting to dial. He glanced up at Purdey. 'Be a good girl and go and get the car ready, will you?'

She glared at him, her eyes flashing. 'Sometimes, Steed . . .' She did not finish the sentence. Sometimes, sheer exasperation got the better of her. She left the room as Steed started to dial Elaine Marlow's number again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Steed eased the Rover gently up the drive leading to Kane's house, with the headlights on full beam. Purdey stared intently ahead through the windscreen, looking out for possible booby-traps. As they neared the house, her sharp eyes picked out a brief glint of reflected light. 'There,' she whispered softly, pointing through the windscreen to the side of the house.

Steed followed her direction, seeing nothing. 'A cybernaut?' he asked.

Purdey nodded. 'I think so,' she said. 'It definitely looked like something shiny. The car headlights picked it out, just for a second.'

'All right . . . you know what to do,' Steed said to her. Reaching under the dashboard, he handed her a small canister.

Purdey crouched down low in the passenger seat as they approached the house. Her fingers probed to the door, slipping the door catch so that it was just open.

Steed drove on to the front of the house, bringing the car to a rest directly outside the steps leading up to the front door. Opening the car door, he stepped out, leaving the engine running. He peered, cautiously all around him.

On the other side of the Rover, shielded from the house, Purdey dropped silently out on to the ground,

easing back the door with a faint click which was effectively drowned by the noise of Steed slamming his. She crouched into position behind the rear wheel, staring out and covering Steed's back.

As he began to mount the steps, the lurking cybernaut lumbered out from the side of the house, cutting off any possible retreat. Purdey smiled inwardly, realising that she had been right. She gripped the canister in her hand tightly, raising her body on to the tips of her toes in readiness.

Steed reached the front door. Behind him, the cybernaut moved stealthily, closing the gap which separated them. As it came level with the car, Purdey jumped up into the attack. With all the grace of her ballet training, she danced across the gravel drive with hardly a sound. She came up behind the robot, out of its line of vision, the canister outstretched in her right hand.

Too late, Kane saw the girl's hand enter the far corner of his monitor screen as she confronted the cybernaut. She thumbed the button of the aerosol can, carefully directing the fine spray of black paint into the shiny steel face of the cybernaut. Kane's monitor went blank as the matt paint blinded his machine's eyes.

The cybernaut lashed out blindly, sweeping its steel arms about in scything movements, but Purdey had already danced back well out of range. She sprinted back to the car, jumping into the driving seat and slamming it into gear. In seconds, she had whipped the Rover round in a tight circle with a squeal of tyres and a hiss of flying gravel. Stamping down on the accelerator, she pointed the bonnet of the car at the threshing figure of the cybernaut. The heavy car slammed into the machine at over

thirty mph, sending it flying backwards. As it tottered and fell, Purdey reversed the car a few feet, then let it start to roll forwards again. With a lurch, the front wheel bounced up over the fallen machine, coming to rest on the centre of its metal chest. Purdey slammed on the handbrake, jumped out and ran to join Steed at the front door.

He looked back at the trapped cybernaut, grinning. The whole operation had taken less than thirty seconds. 'You're a menace to pedestrians, do you know that?' he said quietly.

Turning back to the door, he prodded it experimentally. It sighed open, exposing the empty hallway. Light came from a room along the hall. As Steed and Purdey stood, motionless, Kane's voice called out to them.

'Come in, Steed. I've been expecting you.'

Warily, they crept down the hallway towards the open door. Kane stood in the centre of the room, clutching the control console tightly. He was wearing the beaming mask. 'I should have known you would have at least one trick up your sleeve,' he observed, a trifle ruefully. 'I see you have effectively put one of my dumb friends out of commission. Still, it is of little consequence.' He moved aside, revealing the bound Gambit behind him. A cybernaut was bent over him, its steel fingers wrapped around his throat. 'As you can see ... I still hold a few aces,' Kane went on. He nodded down at the control panel. 'I have only to touch a button, and your friend Gambit dies instantly. I suggest you do not make any silly moves.'

There was no choice. Steed and Purdey moved, slowly, into the room. As they passed through the portal, the

second cybernaut moved out from its position against the wall, blocking off any exit.

'Well well,' Steed said, confronting his old foe. 'Still playing with tin soldiers . . . at your age.'

The leering mask betrayed nothing. Kane's voice was cold, matter of fact. 'They were necessary to me. Now, they have almost served their purpose. Soon I shall dispose of them . . . after I have disposed of you and your companions.' Kane broke off, staring over Steed's shoulder at Purdey. 'Ah, I see you brought Purdey with you after all. I thought you would. It will give me the utmost pleasure to improve upon my original plan. Not only shall I kill her first . . . I shall do it in front of your very eyes. Every spasm of anguish on your face will be an orgy of pleasure to me.'

His fingers flitted over the controls as he spoke. From behind, the second cybernaut moved forwards quickly, its metal hand clamping down upon Purdey's shoulder.

'I advise you not to struggle, my dear,' Kane said in a calm voice. 'A broken collarbone can be very painful . . . or so I'm told.'

Purdey fought her natural tendency to break away, holding a firm, poised stance.

'Please walk slowly over to join Mister Gambit,' Kane said, stabbing at the console again. The cybernaut prodded her forward with its other hand. Meekly, Purdey obeyed, crossing the room to stand beside Gambit and Professor Mason. She cast a fervent look over at Steed. 'Well don't just stand there . . . do something,' she complained bitterly. 'What about this great master plan of yours?'

Steed looked at her in astonishment. 'Master Plan? Me? I thought *you* had a plan.'

Purdey's lips curled into a sneer. 'Very funny,' she said, without a great deal of enthusiasm.

Kane looked at them both impatiently. 'Your foolish joking will soon have to stop,' he warned Steed. 'But just in case you would like a quick taste of things to come . . .' He fingered the controls. Purdey's body stiffened suddenly as the metal hand tightened on her shoulder. She was unable to stop a brief scream of pain being torn from between her lips.

Kane made the cybernaut loosen its grip again. 'You see?' he said triumphantly. 'You see how easy it is to snuff out a human life in the twinkling of an eye?'

Steed was grim-faced. He took a step forward towards Kane. 'All right, Kane . . . that's enough,' he snapped in a cold, emotionless voice. 'Let's get down to business. I'll offer you a deal . . . my life for theirs.'

Kane laughed incredulously. 'A deal, Steed? What makes you think you are in any position to offer me terms?'

Steed allowed the faintest flicker of a smile to cross his face. It did not go unnoticed. Beneath the mask, Kane's eyes shifted uncertainly. 'I'm in a stronger position than you might think, Kane,' Steed said calmly. 'We have, at the moment, what is known as a stand-off situation.'

'Rubbish,' Kane retorted. 'I have you all at my mercy.'

Steed shook his head. 'Not so, old fruit. 'What you actually have at this moment is the immediate ability to kill either Purdey or Gambit. Either . . . not both. I, on the other hand, have the means of disabling or destroying you. However, I cannot use it in time to save one of my

friends ... and I want to save both of them. Hence the offer of a deal ... just you and me.'

Kane stared at him in silence for several seconds, gazing deep into Steed's eyes. There was no trace of expression, yet something of an air of quiet confidence radiated out from the man.

Finally, Kane shook his head. 'No ... you're bluffing,' he accused.

Steed returned his gaze, poker-faced. 'You know me better than that, Felix. I don't bluff ... and I don't walk into traps without some way out of them. Think, Felix ... use your brain. Professor Mason telephoned to warn me that you were going after Purdey ... but that's not all he managed to tell me.'

For the first time, Kane seemed rattled. 'What are you talking about?' he blurted out.

Steed continued in the same calm, confident voice. 'Professor Mason is a much more clever man than you gave him credit for. He tricked you, Kane ... he outsmarted you. When he built that metal body of yours, he had the foresight to build a certain flaw into its mechanics. I know that flaw ... and using that knowledge I can de-activate you in less than ten seconds.'

Kane whirled on Mason. 'Is this true?' he screamed, madly.

Steed breathed a silent prayer. He had been lying through his teeth. Now, he just hoped that Mason wouldn't let him down. He was not to be disappointed. Weak as he was, Mason had followed Steed's line of reasoning and knew what to do. He gave a little laugh. 'Yes, it's true,' he grunted painfully.

Kane whirled back to face Steed as he spoke again. 'So

you see, Felix . . . it's a stand-off, just like I told you. Ten seconds, Felix . . . that's all the time you have. Time to kill one person before you die yourself.'

Kane fidgeted nervously, beginning to pace up and down, his gaze flitting from one person to another in total confusion.

Steed ignored him, for his attention was fully directed at the two cybernauts. There must be a sign soon, he thought, desperately. He could not stall Kane for much longer.

The cybernaut holding Purdey suddenly hummed briefly. Its metal head moved, the merest fraction of an inch. Kane missed it, totally engrossed in his own doubts.

Steed's face broke into an open grin. 'The game's up, Felix. We have you cold,' he announced happily.

Kane glared at him. 'Now I know you're bluffing,' he said, but there was no conviction in his voice.

Steed began to move towards him. 'So call it,' he murmured in a conversational tone.

Kane fell back a couple of paces, stabbing at the control panel and punching out the mechanical commands which would crush Purdey's spinal column in seconds.

No scream of agony greeted Kane's ears. He whirled towards Purdey, repeating the electronic commands. Instead of tightening its grip, the cybernaut opened its fingers and stepped away from her. It began to hum gently . . . then the head began to swivel round in a slow, continuous circle.

The humming grew louder, rising to a shrill mechanical whine. The head was spinning like a top now, starting to make the most alarming rattling noises.

Desperate, without comprehension, Kane looked at his other machine. It had released its grip on Gambit, and was now lurching against the wall, its arms flailing about like a pair of demented windmills. With a series of loud clanging noises, it progressed along the wall, smashing great holes in the plasterwork. Reaching the corner, it slammed heavily into the end wall and bounced off, careering back into the centre of the room on tottering metal legs.

Kane had to run backwards as the wild machine lurched towards him, its deadly arms flying in all directions.

Purdey had run to Steed's side. 'What's happening, for God's sake?'

Steed grinned. 'I think the Third Cavalry is just arriving,' he said, pulling Purdey by the arm as the demented cybernaut flailed past them.

Kane let out a scream of frustrated rage, stabbing at the control console and de-activating both machines. They fell still at once, still humming loudly. In impotent fury, Kane dashed the control console to the floor. It burst open, with a fizzle of sparks and an acrid smell of burning insulation.

Steed called towards the open doorway. 'You can come in now, Doctor Marlow.'

Elaine Marlow strolled in through the door, carrying a large black box, bristling with hastily-soldered connections, wires and antennae. A large battery, and several other hastily-assembled electronic gadgets hung from one shoulder on a stout leather strap. She looked down at the collapsed cybernauts thoughtfully, patting the black box. 'Well, I'm certainly glad this little rig-up did the trick,' she said. 'I would have been mad if it didn't . . . I had to

break up a perfectly splendid stereo system to get some of the parts I needed.'

Steed looked across at Kane, smiling broadly. 'A simple radio jamming device,' he said by way of explanation. 'But rather effective, wouldn't you agree?'

Kane snarled like a trapped wild animal. Beneath the beaming mask, his wicked eyes rolled insanely, pouring out hate. 'You haven't beaten me yet, Steed,' he screamed out. With a prodigious leap, his metal legs took him clear across the room, to land beside Gambit and the Professor. 'I can still kill Gambit ... and Mason,' he threatened. 'Perhaps you had forgotten that.'

'No, I hadn't, actually,' Steed murmured. He moved a couple of steps forward. 'The offer still goes, Felix ... just you and me. Are you man enough for that?'

Kane chortled madly. He smashed his steel fist against his breastplate with a loud clang. 'I'm more than man enough,' he boasted. 'I have the power and strength to break you into little pieces, Steed.'

'So start breaking.' Steed moved forwards another couple of steps, coming into range of Kane's arms. He dropped into a defensive crouch, as Kane moved out from the wall to meet him.

The metal arm sliced out towards Steed's head. He ducked under the blow, darting in quickly and smashing a punch full into the leering mask. Jumping back quickly, Steed had the satisfaction of hearing Kane squeal with sudden pain. As he looked, blood began to bubble out through the mouth-slit of the mask.

'Hello, Felix ... I do believe you've sprung a leak,' Steed taunted him, weaving to one side as Kane lashed

out with his right leg. With a loud whistling sound, the metal foot passed Steed's kneecap by centimetres.

Circling warily as Kane prepared to make another attack, Steed eased back gently to the wall where Gambit and Mason were propped up. There, he stood his ground, letting Kane come straight in at him.

With a yell of triumph, Kane shot forwards, smashing out with his clenched metal fist in a straight punch aimed at Steed's chest. If the blow had connected, it would have smashed in his ribcage like matchwood. Instead, Steed swivelled on the balls of his feet, letting Kane's fist just graze the lapels of his jacket. As it smashed against the wall, Steed turned back, grasping Kane's one human arm in a vice-like grip and spinning him savagely around.

As Kane tottered back, temporarily unbalanced, Steed dropped to his knees, placing his mouth to Professor Mason's ear. 'Your accelerator ... does it work in reverse?' he hissed, urgently. Mason nodded, weakly.

It was all Steed wanted to know. Bounding to his feet, he neatly side-stepped Kane's next wild charge and snatched up a table-lamp from the work-bench Mason had used. Thrusting it out in front of him, holding it firmly by the base, Steed moved in towards Kane, screaming out to Purdey at the same time, 'Switch it on, Purdey.'

Kane laughed at the puny weapon, snatching out to tear it from Steed's hand. A split second before his steel hand closed around the end of the lamp, Purdey found the switch and snapped it on. The lamp's bulb lit for a second before it was crushed in Kane's steely grip. There was a brief flash, a single, ear-piercing scream of horrifying intensity ... and Kane dropped like a stone.

Steed dropped the table-lamp, staring down at the inert body by his feet.

'Is he dead?' Purdey asked, moving up beside him.

Elaine Marlow answered instead. 'Worse,' she said in a flat voice. 'He is reduced to a form of life slightly below the vegetable level. Real death will come in a few hours.' She looked up at Steed, admiration in her eyes. 'That was a brilliant thought, Mr Steed.'

He shrugged, modestly. Purdey, her eyes flashing green with jealousy, tugged at his sleeve, distracting him. 'What did you do?' she hissed.

Steed tried to explain in simple terms. 'The encephalic accelerator which Professor Mason invented was based on a simple principle of amplifying brain-waves into mild electric currents ... just strong enough to operate machinery,' he said. 'Quite obviously ... that principle works in exact reverse. Put a massive dose of electric current back in at the other end, and it will be converted into a sudden and uncontrollable rush of neural impulses. The human brain could not possibly stand a shock like that. Quite literally, Kane's brain burned itself out, in a fraction of a second.'

Purdey shuddered. 'What a way to go.'

Steed shrugged. 'It was probably quite painless,' he said. 'And certainly no worse than the fate he had in store for us.' He glanced down at Kane's body with a certain compassion. 'Still, poor old Felix,' he muttered. 'The last of the cybernauts.'

EPILOGUE

'You'll be glad to know that Professor Mason is going to be fine,' Steed announced happily, replacing the telephone receiver in its cradle. 'It was touch and go for a while, but they managed to pull him through.'

'Good,' Purdey said, quite genuinely. 'And Kane?'

'They switched off the machine which was keeping his body alive four hours ago,' Steed said. 'It seems there was some sort of bureaucratic foul-up. Red tape won the day again.'

'I don't follow you, Steed,' Purdey said.

Steed smiled wistfully. 'It seems that they had no choice but to switch off,' he said. 'As Kane was officially listed as dead, they couldn't find any medical records. Without the right papers, they couldn't give him any further treatment.' He paused, shaking his head. 'It's ironic, really. Poor old Kane will never know that that twisted mind of his probably ended up in a great humanitarian capacity. In a few years, he could quite well be looked back on as a public benefactor.'

'Explain?' said Gambit.

'Well, crazy as he was, old Felix stumbled upon a really brilliant idea,' Steed went on. 'Professor Mason's invention was originally destined for a purely destructive form of research. Now that Kane's rather novel adaptation has been leaked out, there will be a lot of public

pressure to channel it into more beneficial medical research. Because of Kane, there could be thousands of crippled people living normal lives again within the next few years. Doctor Marlow already has a new vocation in life . . . to make it happen.'

'And how is Doctor Marlow?' Purdey asked, pointedly.

Steed looked at her blankly. 'Funny you should ask that,' he said. 'Would you believe I am meeting her this evening?'

'Is that our cue to leave?' Gambit said.

'It is,' Steed retorted. There didn't seem any point in beating about the bush.

Gambit rose, dragging Purdey behind him. She paused at the door, looking back with a roguish grin on her face. 'Oh Steed . . . I hope you two won't get up to any more shocking things together.'

Steed chuckled contentedly, enjoying the joke as Gambit yanked on her arm, pulling her out of the door.

ENDS

Peter L Cave. 1977

THE CYBERNAUTS

Cumbersome, colossal and deadly, they were metal robots emerging from a past everyone had believed dead ; controlled by a man whose horrible mutilations in a car accident had turned him into a monster, half flesh, half machine.

This is the enemy the Avengers, Steed, Purdey, and Gambit have to face when they discover that Professor Mason, Britain's leading expert on cybernetics has been forcibly abducted from one of the most heavily guarded security establishments in the country.

THE NEW AVENGERS

A series of novels based on the television series starring Patrick Macnee, Joanna Lumley and Gareth Hunt.

Also available :

HOUSE OF CARDS
THE EAGLE'S NEST
TO CATCH A RAT
FIGHTING MEN

FICTION/TV TIE-IN
0 8600 7575 3

U.K. 65p · AUSTRALIA $2.15* · NEW ZEALAND $1.95 · CANADA $1.95
*Recommended Price